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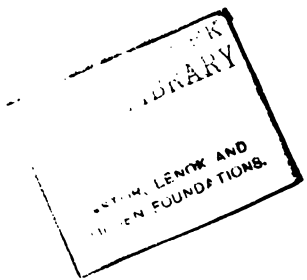
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"And it was peace time in their souls, and the Princess Edgiva lifted her face to Wulnoth and smiled, and her eyes spoke words that her lips uttered not." *[Page 154.]*

Wulnoth
The Wanderer

A Story of
King Alfred of England

BY

H. Escott-Inman

With decorations and frontispiece
by Troy & Margaret West Kinney

Chicago
A. C. McClurg & Co.
1908

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1908
Entered at Stationers' Hall, London, Eng.

Published October 17, 1908

The University Press, Cambridge, U.S.A.

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FOREWORD

HE song of Wulnoth, the born thrall, who was called the Wanderer; the song of the nameless and the landless man who aided two kings to gain kingdoms.

"The song of his friendship for Guthred the prince; the song of his wanderings to find his friend. The song of his perils and warrings, and of his slaying of Hungwar the Dane. The song of his friendship with Alfred the Bretwalda of the West Saxons, and of his love for Edgiva the Beautiful. The song of his turning to the Life Giver; the song of his last fight with Jarl Eric, on the field of the great slaughter. This is the song.

"And this song did Gyso the Gleeman sing by command of Edward the King, the son of Alfred, that the name and the deeds of Wulnoth might not perish, but be remembered by all men."

WULNOTH THE WANDERER

CHAPTER I

How Wyborga the Wise spoke with King Hardacnute

FAR across the dark sea which rolls its waters to the northeast of this England of ours, there rise the dark cliffs and frowning heights of Norway's shores; and there, in the days of old, lived Hardacnute the King. Far inland did his lands extend, fair with many a fertile field where broad streams flowed, and grim with snow-clad peaks, from which the torrents roared and foamed their way down to the sea.

On the cliff-top his castle was built, and around, on many a height, could be seen the halls of jarl and lord, each mighty in war, and each owning Hardacnute as master and overlord.

By night and by day did the warders guard his towers; by night and by day were his long ships ready to put to sea; by night and by day did a hundred shields gleam in his halls, and a hundred spears rest beside them; and by night and by day were there a hundred strong hands ready to grasp the one or to prise the other. For across the dark waves was the way of the sea-kings, and no man could say when their long ships might come sailing from Denmark or Juteland to carry fire and sword along the coast.

Well it became the King to be watchful; and for his watchfulness was there now peace in the land.

A great flaxen-haired man was this King, whose blue eyes could gleam with anger or sparkle with merriment; terrible was he in battle, and yet mild in the hall, and dearly did he love Wulfreda his fair wife, and little Guthred his son, who played in the great courtyard with a tiny shield and spear, which Hald the Constable had fashioned for him.

Blue-eyed and golden-haired was Guthred, with more of his mother's gentle nature than of his father's strong passion, so that Hardacnute frowned sometimes, and said that the boy was too timid, and that he feared pain; but old Hald would laugh and answer —

"Let be, O King; the tender shoot hath not the rough bark of the old tree. Let be. Guthred will prove a brave holda yet."

Now, some way from the King's castle there dwelt a wise woman, one who knew many things that other people could not understand, yet one who used her

power well, and did not seek to cast spells upon man or beast; and it chanced that one day this wise woman came along the road by the castle as the King came riding home from the hunting, with his dogs leaping and the slain bear carried between two sturdy carls. Some of the dogs were fierce, but they tried not to harm old Wyborga; and the King saw, as he rode past on his great horse, that she looked pale and weary, as if from a journey.

So the King called to one of his followers to light from his steed, and he bade Wyborga ride with him to the castle; and he took her to the hall and treated her with honor, and gave her food and sweet mead, for King Hardacnute was ever kind to the old and the young, and to women.

And while Wyborga sat at meat, little Guthred came and played at her side, and laughed up into her face, and the wise woman placed one hand on his fair head and looked into his eyes and sighed, so that the King said —

"Why do you sigh, O mother, when you look into the eyes of this my son?"

"Because of what I see there, O King," answered the wise woman. And the King asked again —

"And what is it that you see, O mother?"

"A long journey to a far land, for a kingdom," answered Wyborga; and at that the King laughed heartily.

"Why, truly, mother, that is but a little thing, for the sea is the road of the sea-kings; and though Guthred

will be king in my place when I have passed to the storm land, yet it may well be that he will carry fire and sword across the sea, and conquer other lands."

"Not fire nor sword will Guthred carry across the sea, O King," she answered, "nor will he reign as king here in thy stead, though he shall be king of a greater realm than thine. The thrall collar shall he wear, and the thrall's part shall he play, yet shall he become a king in his day, and a thrall shall help him to his kingdom."

Now, at that the King paused and pondered, and his brow was troubled, but he said at last—

"Thy riddle is too hard for me, mother, and it seems dark with evil, for how shall my son become a thrall?"

"Thrall makers ride the sea, O King," she answered. And the King said—

"Yet where shall the King be when they come, O mother?" And again she made reply—

"The sword has a death-song for each in turn, O King."

"Now truly, mother," cried the King, "this is a hard thing you say to me, after you have eaten at my table. Evil did I do to bring you here as my guest."

"Not evil, O King," Wyborga answered, "but good. And now listen to my words, O King. This thing will not be yet, and before it comes, over the Westarweg shall come wanderers seeking food and shelter. Be they poor or be they rich, high or low, let thy hand be to them, King, for of their number one will

be the friend of Guthred the Prince. A thrall shall take the thraldom from the Prince, and that a thrall who shall mate with a king's daughter; and now — I go in peace, and thanks for thy kindness."

So Wyborga went her way, and the King pondered and was troubled. Much that she had said he could not understand, but this one thing seemed clear: the wise woman had foretold that foes would come and slay him and carry his little son away into captivity, and that seemed heavy tidings to King Hardacnute. Therefore he called in all his servants, and had great stores of food prepared for siege, and night and day kept watch and ward for the foe who should come across Westarweg, as they called the dark sea.

But no foes came; not a single dark sail appeared, not a single shield shone over the waves to catch the gleams of the sun; and at last the King laughed away his fears, and said that surely Wyborga the Wise must have lost her wisdom.

But in that the King was wrong, for had not Wyborga said that this would not be yet, and that ere the foe arrived wanderers would come seeking shelter and succor? King Hardacnute had forgotten that part of the prophecy.

But when the summer waned and the sea grew wild with the winter gales, when the ice came down from the North, to gleam ghost-like as it slowly floated by, when even the bravest of the sea-kings would have trembled to launch his stout ships — then, one day, as the pale sun died away and the fierce tempests

sprang up, the warder came to say that out on the sea a ship of some sort was to be seen; and at that all men ran to their posts, for perchance this might be the enemy that the wise woman had foretold.

But when the King reached the castle walls and gazed out into the storm wrack, there, beating and buffeted and sore tried, he saw one poor boat, such as the fisher folk use, drifting almost at the mercy of the tempest, and yet seeking to make its way to the shelter of Lethra Fiord.

"Now who can these be?" cried the King. "What madman would put to sea in such a craft on such a night?" But to that old Hald answered —

"Not all who put to sea do so willingly, O King. These are some poor castaways; and it minds me that the wise woman foretold the coming of some such. So I will get me down to the water with some stout hearts, and render them what aid I may."

Then the King gave permission, and Hald and his men went down and launched one of the King's ships to the storm, and with straining oars and slanting sail they came round and rendered help to the storm-beaten ones, and got them safely back, and carried them into King Hardacnute's hall and set them in his presence, so that he might see them for himself.

And the King stared, and perchance he frowned a little, for it seemed a foolish thing to endanger his stout hearts to rescue these travellers, seeing that they were but three, and poorly dressed like carls, and, moreover, two of them wore the collars of thralls.

WULNOTH THE WANDERER

There was a man, big and stalwart, with bold defiant eyes, and erect head, and he had a thrall collar; and there was a woman, fair and timid; and between them they held a child, a boy of about the young Prince's age, but more stalwart and well-knit, and he also had around his little neck the badge of slavery.

The three stood there waiting for the King to speak, and yet for the moment the King made no sound, for he gazed upon that child. A bold daring child he seemed. Tender of years though he was, his eyes were blue as the bluest summer sky, and his long hair shone yellow gold, as though the sun had kissed it; and the King looked and wondered, and thought that he had never seen so fair a child, no, not even when he looked at his own little son, Prince Guthred.

And while he sat looking, the Prince himself ran into the hall brandishing his tiny spear and shield, and seeing a little one of his own age, he ran to him, flourishing his baby weapons.

But the little stranger did not flinch; though the spear-head grazed his arm, he only smiled. And then Guthred slipped and fell, and his shield and spear went flying across the hall, so that the little stranger ran and gathered them up and then aided the Prince, and gave him his weapons back and stood beside him, his arm round the other's neck, as though he were holda and noble, and not a churl's child. Thereat the King frowned, and then he turned to the man and spoke and asked him whence he came, and who he was, and how

came he to be in the boat, with woman and child, on such a stormy day?

"Wast thou washed away against thy will?" he asked, "and dost thou desire to be safely sent back to thy lord?" And at that the face of the man darkened, and the woman began to weep, while the child seized the baby spear, and cried so that even the King heard his shrill voice —

"My father, better this than to go back now."

"Now," said the King, "truly we have a young wolf cub here. Tell me your story, friend, that I may learn that from which you flee, and why this child, who is little more than a babe, talks so largely of choosing the kiss of the spear before return to that place from whence ye came. Methinks this means that we have thralls who have fled from their thraldom."

And then the man stepped forward, and he spoke, and his voice sounded strong and clear; nor, though he was in the presence of the King, did he show any fear.

"Truly, O King, this child speaks well," he said; "for there is no going back for us. And, truly, as thou sayest, we are thralls, and thralls who have fled from thraldom, seeing that is worse than death. Know, O King, that I am Cerdic, the son of Elchere; and this woman is Olfa, and this child is our son Wulnoth —"

"Thou art Saxon, then, if thy name speaks truly," said the King. "How comes one of the name of the noble Cerdic to wear a thrall's collar?"

"This is the matter of it, O King," Cerdic

answered. "Of the blood of Cerdic am I; yet, as thou perchance knowest, the sons of Cerdic sailed across the Westarweg to the land of East Anglia, leaving Tholk to rule in the place where they were born. Yet Tholk was unworthy, and made a league with Berwulf the Viking; whereat I and others rebelled, and were therefore made landless and nameless, and the thrall collars were placed upon us. Yet this I might have abided, though the blood of jarls was in my veins; but this Berwulf broke his treaty, and put Tholk to death and made himself lord in his place; and because I would not own him he had me beaten with rods, and would have had me slain but that I burst my bonds and struck him down with his own axe; and then, escaping, made to the sea with my wife and my son. For it was better to trust to the fury of the winter storms than to abide the cruel wrath of Viking Berwulf. For six long days and nights have we battled with the tempests, while the storm sisters have ridden around us; and then we sighted thy walls, O King. And, now that we are here, either slay us or send us on our way if thou canst not keep us here; but send us not back to Berwulf, who, methinks, would be as much thy foe as mine."

Then did King Hardacnute swear a mighty oath by Thor's hammer that no harm should come to Cerdic or his while he bided in Lethra.

"These Danish pirates," he cried, "are foes to all honest men, and each should help the other against them. Bide thou here in safety, Cerdic, son of Elchere,

thou and thine, and no harm shall come to thee. But as for thy thrall collar, it was put on by thy lord because thou didst rebel against him; and it is not meet that I should take it off until thou hast proved thyself in the man's game, making the sword sing the death song in the ears of thy foes."

"That will I do when the time comes, O King," answered Cerdic. "For the rest, I am content, and my service is thine."

"Thou shalt have house and a piece of land," said the King, "and my Stallere shall allow thee grazing; and as for thy little son —"

But then a little voice spoke, and Prince Guthred ran to his father's side, crying —

"Wulnoth must stay with me, O father. Wulnoth must stay and be my playmate." And at that the King laughed and said that it should be so.

So this is how little Wulnoth, the child of a fugitive and a thrall, and himself wearing a thrall collar, came to dwell in the King's hall and to play with Guthred the Prince; and though some of the jarls and warriors frowned and said that this thing should not be, the King took little heed; and the Queen smiled on the boy who played with her own son, and the two lads were happy together.

And all this time there was peace in the land, and no sign of the viking lords coming with fire and sword; and all this time did the King have watch and ward kept.

But sometimes, as he stood on his tower and looked

over the long, rolling waves of the Westarweg, he would think of the words of Wyborga, and wonder within himself whether they would ever come true.

Now, this is how Wyborga the Wise prophesied evil tidings to the King; and this is how Cerdic, and Olfa his wife, and Wulnoth their son, came from the storm-sea to dwell in the King's land.

CHAPTER II

How Wulnoth saved Edgiva from the Bear

SO Cerdic the Saxon took service with the King of Lethra; and the King gave him a cottage and a piece of land, where he lived with Olfa his wife. But Wulnoth his son was most of his time up in the King's hall playing with the little Prince Guthred; and, though some of the nobles frowned, a great friendship sprang up between the two children, so that they called each other brother, and each shared the other's joys and sorrows; and it was hard to say whether Guthred was most happy when he was with Wulnoth in Cerdic's cottage, or Wulnoth, when he was in the King's courtyard with the Prince.

And three years passed away with their sun and their snow, and still it was peace in the land, and the vikings did not appear. For some had gone to Angle Land, where there were fertile fields to be seized; and some had followed the mighty Hrolf — who was called

The Walker, because he was so heavy that no horse could bear his weight — into Normandy to war against Charles the Simple; and others, again, had journeyed over the mighty river and the snow-clad mountains to carry fire and sword into the provinces of the Romans.

And in those three years the two boys grew strong and sturdy, and now they were each fourteen years old; yet still Wulnoth was the stronger.

If Guthred could run swiftly, Wulnoth could beat him. If Guthred could wrestle with any son of the jarls, Wulnoth could throw Guthred. If Guthred could send an arrow to the mark, Wulnoth could split the Prince's shaft from feather to head; so that the King said that the wolf cub would grow into a fine wolf one of these days and do great deeds in the land.

And though Wulnoth could best the Prince in most things, there was neither jealousy nor quarrellings; but the two boys loved like brothers, though Wulnoth never forgot that he was but a thrall's son, and wore thrall collar. The Prince would forget that, but Wulnoth never did, and he ever spoke of his companion as "my friend and Prince."

Now, you must know that about the time that Cerdic had first come to Lethra, the little Princess Edgiva was born; so that now she was three years old; and throughout all the land, yea, and throughout all wide Norway, there was not another child so beautiful as Edgiva, the daughter of Hardacnute.

Her skin was like the pink blush of the morning sky, or the tender leaf of the rose-bud; her teeth were

like the purest pearls, and her eyes blue as the rarest sapphire; while, as for her hair, never spider spun thread so fine, never gold gleamed and played in the sunlight so brightly, and never down of the thistle, or wool of the sheep, was so soft.

The scalds sang songs in her praise, and said that when she grew up she would be the fairest woman in all the world, fit to become bride of the mightiest of kings.

And a dear, sweet, loving child she was, with a smile for all and a frown for none, except those who did wrong; and of all in Lethra she smiled most upon the little thrall-boy, Wulnoth; and Wulnoth was never so happy, no, not even when playing with Guthred, as when he was sitting watching Edgiva.

It was his strong brown hand that first held her as she tried to walk; and when they bought a little pony for her, it was Wulnoth who walked by her side and held the bridle, lest the creature should rear and throw his precious burden.

And at this some of the lords were more angry than ever; for they said it was a high honor for any lad to attend Princess Edgiva, and that their sons should come before a mere churl. And perchance the King would have listened to their speech, but that Wulfreda, the Queen, said their daughter liked the boy, and that it was a princess's right to choose her own servant; while as for old Hald the Constable, he laughed until the tears came into his fierce eyes, and he cried —

"By Odin! but some people are ever jealous, let

what may happen. The boy is right, O King; and he has the thews of a young viking and the heart of a hero; and there is no peril would touch Edgiva while Wulnoth stood unwounded."

Hald, old and renowned as he was, had a big heart, and he did not forget that though he was noble and jarl now, his own father had been a churl until the day of his death.

So, despite frowns and grumblings, Wulnoth walked by the side of the Princess; and he and Guthred called themselves her knights, and waited upon her pleasure and delighted to do her bidding.

Now, all this time nothing had been seen of Wyborga the wise woman; for she had been a journey to places afar, as was her custom at certain seasons, despite her age; and the King had forgotten all about her dark sayings, or, if ever he remembered them, it was but as the idle tale of a poor old crone, whose wits had gone with the years that were fled. King Hardacnute ruled wisely and well, and was at peace with his neighbors, and the land was happy.

Only sometimes Hald and other old warriors would shake their heads when they took counsel together, and they would say —

"The times are too easy, and the people are too slow. They forget the hardships of war-time, and if the sword came into the land again, it would go hard with us."

Well, one summer's day, when the fields were bright with flowers and the corn grew high, almost

ready for the reaping, and when the kine stood knee deep in the long grass in the valleys, Prince Guthred and Wulnoth set out for a long ramble, and between them, on her little pony, Edgiva rode, a garland of white blossoms, which Wulnoth had fashioned, upon her beautiful hair.

All the world seemed bright and beautiful: the sun shone, and the birds sang, and the brooks rippled, and all seemed to say to them — "Waes heal to you, little travellers — waes heal to the three fair ones." The squirrels played in the branches, and the sea-birds screamed as they passed overhead, and the great, lazy pigs grunted as they rolled in the woodland shade, and all seemed to say — "Waes heal to the three fair ones."

So they went through the meadow-land; and they went through the woodland glade, where the great ferns spring up and the good people hide from men's eyes all the day long, waiting for the gloaming, to creep out and dance their fairy dances; and yet, though they looked carefully and peered into many a tiny glen and sat without the least sound for quite ten minutes, never one of the good people could they see, but only the rabbits and the wild birds, and the little darting lizards.

And presently they came to a dell, and there they sat and ate their cakes, which they had brought with them, and drank from the skin of milk, which Wulnoth had brought especially for Edgiva — for he and the Prince would have had the cool water from the brook,

only the Princess insisted that they three, who were friends, should share all things equally.

And while they sat there, a stick cracked in the woods, and Wulnoth started up, ready to guard the Princess if need be: for if a stick cracked some foot must have pressed it.

But no foe, either man or beast, came into the glade, but only an old woman with gentle face and kindly eyes, and hair white as the snow from the north; and this woman said, as she surveyed the children —

"Greeting to you, little ones. All good greeting to you." And they answered her —

"All good greeting to you also, good mother."

"And who are you, and how are you called?" asked the woman; "and how is it that a prince and princess have a thrall for their playmate?"

Then the Prince looked angry, for he did not like people to speak so to his dear Wulnoth; and even little Edgiva looked pained. But Wulnoth only laughed, and he made reply —

"Good mother, the great and high, if they are good and true, may hold out hand to the poor and gain no dishonor thereby. And those who are lowly born may take such friendship, and yet no harm be done; and so it is in this case."

"Thou hast answered well and truly, Wulnoth, son of Cerdic," the woman said; and at that Wulnoth stared, and demanded how she knew his name.

"I know many things," answered the woman, who was really old Wyborga returning from her travels to

her own house. "I know many things, and this is one of them — many wonderful things."

"Tell us some more of thy wonderful things, good mother," pleaded the little Princess. "Tell us, for we are fond of wonder tales."

"Not now, little Princess," answered the wise woman; "go on with your play. And you, little Prince, when you get back home, say to your father the King that Wyborga sends him greeting, and says that the time draws nigh."

"What time, good mother?" asked Guthred curiously; but Wyborga shook her head.

"A dark time, little Prince, for thee and for thine, of which thou mayst not know now. But remember when sorrow and tears come, as come they will, that manhood and honor are better than a throne. Remember that a prince's word, and the word of every true man, must be kept, though death be the price of the keeping. Prince Guthred, remember this."

"Now truly, good mother," cried Wulnoth, "you do speak very hard things; and, truly, methinks you had little need to ask our names, seeing that without being told you have mentioned them all to us." And at that Wyborga smiled again.

But then little Edgiva drew close to her, and she again asked her of her wonder stories.

"Cannot you tell us even one?" she said; "not one about Odin or Thor and the heroes who dwell in Walhalla? For these are the most wonderful stories of all."

"Not the most wonderful, nor the most beautiful of all, little Princess," was the answer. "I know of one far better, far more wonderful, and far more beautiful." And at this they all three asked eagerly what this wonderful story could be.

"Oh, so wonderful and so beautiful," answered Wyborga. "The hearing of it turns sorrow to joy, and makes darkness become light, and weakness turn into strength. But you may not hear it yet; for, if I told it to you, you would not understand it. Yet this I promise, that one day you all three shall hear it."

"And will sorrow become joy, and weakness strength, and darkness light, when we hear it?" cried Wulnoth. And Wyborga nodded and said: "It will indeed."

"But when and where shall we hear it?" the children asked. "Shall we come to you again?"

"Nay," answered the wise woman; "you will hear it from other lips, and in another land."

"But what shall be the sign that we shall hear it?" asked the Prince, "and how shall we know that it is the story when it is told?"

"Because it will turn weakness into strength," said Wulnoth. "We are sure to know then."

"And sorrow into joy, and darkness into light," added Edgiva. "Oh, we shall be sure to know, brother."

"I will give you a sign," the wise woman said. And she took two little pieces of rough wood from the ground, and with a piece of grass, she bound them

together in the form of a cross. Then she plucked a little spray of wild thorn and wound it round her cross and held it up; and she said, and her voice was soft and sweet, like the sigh of the summer wind amidst the forest leaves, "This is the sign, dear children. One day you will come to this sign, and then you will hear the most wonderful and the most beautiful story in all the wide world; and when you hear that, you will never want to hear of Odin or Thor any more."

Then she turned and walked away, and not another word could they get from her. So they turned to start on their homeward way, wondering what that strange sign could possibly mean, and what this story could be about.

And as they journeyed on, back through the woodlands, suddenly Edgiva's little pony stopped and planted its forefeet firmly and laid back its ears, snorting and trembling as if with fear.

"What can be the matter with him?" asked Prince Guthred. "There is nothing to frighten him."

"Be not so sure of that, Prince," said Wulnoth. "The pony may see more than we can; I have heard that animals can see warlocks and wizards when they are invisible to mortal eyes."

"Then what shall we do for Edgiva?" cried Guthred. "We must not let warlocks harm her."

"Let me get down and pat him," Edgiva said. "I will gather him a handful of sweet grass and then he will go on."

So they helped her to alight; but alas, no sooner

had her foot touched the ground than they heard a dreadful sound, a deep, angry growl of rage and hate; and there, emerging from the undergrowth, with eyes ablaze and with yellow gleaming fangs, they saw an immense old he bear, a real wood-roamer, a honey-finder, who now was seeking for no honey.

And the pony, with a snort of terror, started off as fast as it could go, leaving the children alone there, with the monster approaching them.

For a moment Prince Guthred stood bewildered, and little Edgiva clasped her tiny hands in terror; for, indeed, this seemed a very dreadful creature, and its size was so vast and its claws so long, and it seemed to be saying to itself as it came along —

"Ho, ho! Here is a fine meal for me. This is better than risking the swineherd's spear when I go stealing the pigs. Ho, ho! This is much better."

Of course, the bear did not really say that; but that is what it seemed to the children; so it is no wonder that they were frightened.

"Run, Guthred! Run! Take Edgiva and run!" screamed Wulnoth frantically. "I will stay here and keep the bear busy."

But even in his terror Prince Guthred remembered that Wulnoth was his friend, and it seemed a hard thing to him to run away and leave him alone.

But Wulnoth cried again — "Run with thy sister, Prince. Edgiva must be before all."

So Prince Guthred caught up Edgiva in his strong arms and began to run, while Wulnoth threw a stone

at the bear to make him turn his way. But the bear did not turn; perhaps he thought that two children were better than one — but he commenced to rush after Guthred, with great roars of rage; and Wulnoth ran after the bear, calling him a coward and a nithing, and bidding him stop and fight; and, as he ran, he unsheathed his stout knife and held it ready. It was the only weapon he had, and the stoutest hunters might have been forgiven if they had feared to attack such a monster with no better arms. But Wulnoth did not think of that. Edgiva must be saved, and he and that knife must save her.

And just then Guthred caught his foot in a trailing bramble, and fell, and the bear was now very nigh them. But Wulnoth was also very near to the bear, running so swiftly that the blades of grass had not even time to bend beneath his weight before he had passed on, and the gleaming knife was ready in his hand.

Now Wulnoth knew full well that the bear would not harm the others without first rising on his hind legs — for that is the way in which the bears always attack — and for that he was ready and waiting.

The bear stopped with a clumsy jerk just as Guthred scrambled to his feet, and it opened its great paws wide to seize the boy. But Wulnoth was there, and he pushed Guthred aside and darted under the bear's paws, and buried his knife in its broad, hairy chest, once, twice, and yet a third time, swifter than the lightning plays or the adder darts. Then the bear roared, and strove to bite with its wide-open, slavering

jaws, and it dug its long claws deeply into Wulnoth's back, and tore muscle and flesh to the bone. But that was all it could do. It had no strength left, and it fell on its side and struggled and died; and Wulnoth uttered a mighty shout of joy, and thought nothing of his painful wounds, for he had done a man's deed and had saved Edgiva and his friend the Prince.

And Guthred and Edgiva came to him and strove to check the blood that dripped from his hurts, and the Princess would make him sit while she used her own scarf for this purpose.

"Oh, Wulnoth!" cried Guthred, "surely here is the story already, for weakness has become strength, and you have conquered the waster while I fled like a nithing."

"Wulnoth has been brave," said Edgiva, "but you have naught to grieve for, dear brother. As for the story, this cannot be it, for the sign of the thorn and the cross are not here."

"Let us not worry about stories," laughed Wulnoth, and he was as happy as could be. Indeed, his only sorrow was that Guthred had not slain a bear also, so that they could have been alike. "Let us skin this monster and take his coat home for the Princess to have a rug for her feet."

So they set to work, the two boys, and though it was a long job, they got the bear's skin, together with its mighty head and paws; and then they found the pony again, for that was grazing in a field hard by, and they put the skin on its back and Edgiva on the skin, and set off again.

And when they reached the castle, and the soldiers saw the skin, they clustered round in wonder, asking who had killed the monster. Wulnoth would have said little, but Guthred said much, and the men caught Wulnoth up and cried, "Skoal" to him, and carried him into the hall and set him down before the King, and laid the head and the claws and the great skin on the floor.

And now again Wulnoth would have said little, for he was modest and did not like to boast, and besides, he did not want to seem braver than the Prince, who would have done as he had done if the chance had been his. But Guthred and Edgiva stood at the King's side and told of the fight, and made Wulnoth show his wounds, and the King said that Wulnoth had done a man's deed, and asked him what his reward should be.

Now, the King had expected that the boy would ask that the thrall collar should be taken from his neck and from his father's, but Wulnoth made no such request.

"O King," he said, "if, as thou sayest, I have done a man's deed, let a man's weapons be given to me now, and let it be my place to guard Edgiva thy daughter, and to sleep across the threshold at night."

Then, for a moment, the King paused and frowned, for a memory came of the words of Wyborga that a thrall should marry a king's daughter; and he wondered whether that thrall was to be this boy, and the king's daughter Edgiva; for if he had thought that, though Wulnoth had slain the bear and preserved the

Princess, he would have driven his spear through him as he stood, and so have made an end of the matter.

Then, when the jarls heard this thrall-boy's words, they cried out that he should be beaten with sticks for his presumption.

"Shall the son of a churl be made the Princess's guardian?" they cried. "Are there no sons of noble birth in the land, O King?"

But Wulnoth stood out, and turned and showed them the deep wounds made by the claws of the bear, and he cried —

"Many there be more noble in the land, but are there any who would have dared more? Did the bear wound me more lightly than he would have wounded any man? Are these wounds less painful to the churl than they would be to the noble? The King asked me what I desired, and I have answered. I want no other gift, and if this may not be, then let be."

"He talks like a man," some laughed; but old Hald, who liked the boy, answered —

"And by the hammer of Thor, he acts like one, and I am minded that our Edgiva would have little to fear with Wulnoth the son of Cerdic as her armed man."

"The thing shall be," answered the King, and when that was said all had to obey. "Wulnoth shall be given sword and spear and shield, and his shall it be to guard the Princess, and if any harm comes to her, then his head shall pay the penalty. I have spoken, and the thing is."

So Wulnoth the boy was given the war tools of a man, and he was appointed the guardian of the Princess, which is just what he had appointed himself in the past, only then he had no weapons save his knife.

But when King Hardacnute heard the message which Wyborga had sent to him, his face grew very grave, for it showed him that if he had forgotten, the wise woman had remembered, and that the time was drawing near when war time should be in the land.

And also the children spoke of the wonder tale that Wyborga had hinted at, and of the strange thorn cross which she had made; and the King listened and answered —

"By Thor, I can make nothing of it! 'T is like her other tale, and it may be that the one has as much in it as the other."

Now, this is how Wulnoth saved Edgiva from the bear, and how he won the man's tools and was appointed watcher over the Princess. And this is how Wyborga the Wise came again into the land, and showed the three children the sign of the thorn-crowned cross.

CHAPTER III

How Wulnoth journeyed by the Birds' Road

O Wulnoth became the guard to watch over Princess Edgiva, and some of King Hardacnute's warriors were wroth, and said that the thing was a shame, and that even if it were not so, a boy like Cerdic's son should not be given such an honorable task when many a young noble would have been glad to accept such trust.

But though Wulnoth was indeed a boy in years, yet in stature and in strength he was a match for many above his age, so tall and so lusty was he. And old Hald laughed again when he heard these words, and he said —

"The wolf cub is almost grown; let those beware its fangs who would pull its ears."

And amongst those who were angered at the King's choice was the keeper of the arms, Æthelmar; and he, to spite the boy, gave him the weapons of the strongest — the heaviest spear and the weightiest

sword and shield; and he in his turn laughed and said to himself —

"Now we shall see how Hald's wolf cub will bear the weight of the toys he has asked for."

Wulnoth knew his weapons were too heavy, but he was too proud to seek to have them altered, and he would have borne them in patience but that Hald saw him; and the old Constable stopped and stroked his beard, and asked him who it was who gave him his man's tools.

"Now, these are too weighty for you," he said when Wulnoth had answered him, "and it was but a poor trick of Æthelmar's to give such to you. You must have lighter ones, my young warrior."

But Wulnoth answered that since he had been given these he would keep them, and even Æthelmar should see that his strength was equal to his task.

"Not so," said the Constable, quietly, when he heard the boy's words. "That only comes from a proud heart, and the Princess must not be endangered because of your pride."

"How could the Princess be endangered?" cried Wulnoth. "I do not see that, Hald."

"Weapons that you cannot use are as if you had no weapons at all, Wulnoth," replied Hald. "How, if you had to use that long spear, which is too clumsy for you, or that sword which is too heavy? The Princess might suffer harm because you could not well protect her. We must have this remedied, my son."

And Hald was as good as his word, and gave

Wulnoth man's tools more suited to his strength, and he said —

"Let not pride make thee fall, Wulnoth. If they laugh at thee for having these, thou canst the better show them thy skill when the day of testing comes."

At that Wulnoth was content, and though some laughed at him, he answered laugh with laugh, and never bore himself like a boaster, nor was led to talk of what he could do, but he only answered when such questions were put to him —

"One cannot say what he will do until the test comes. When the hour is, then I hope I shall not prove a nithing, and meanwhile I cannot do better than watch such skilled warriors as you who now laugh at my youth."

Now, that showed that Wulnoth was wise, for had he answered angrily he would but have been laughed at the more, and would have made many enemies, whereas now the soldiers said that he was modest and well-spoken, and they taught him many things relating to war; and Cerdic his father, each day when the boy used to visit him, made him exercise both with sword and spear, and in running and wrestling; and Prince Guthred would exercise with him, so that he, too, might become a mighty champion in his day, and go to the wars with his friend.

But the Prince was not so cunning nor so strong as Wulnoth, and, moreover, he was more gentle and tender; and sometimes the King his father would be angry, and say that he was more fitted to handle a

distaff than to hurl a spear. But the King was wrong — the boy was gentle and kind, but his heart was brave, and he was patient, more patient than Wulnoth even, and he who has learnt patience has learnt a mighty lesson.

But in all this time no sign of the sea-kings was seen, though by day and night watch was kept, and all along the coast the great beacons were piled ready for the lighting should the long ships of the pirates be sighted upon the waves.

And the King laughed, and said that surely Wyborga the Wise was wise no longer, for her stories, though they were ill-omened, did not come true.

As for the skin of the wood-roamer, that was made into a foot rug for Edgiva, and the head and the paws were placed in the King's hall, with a rude writing beneath, made by Reinbaldus the Scald, to tell how Wulnoth, the son of Cerdic, slew the monster with his knife.

So the days passed away, and now Wulnoth was fifteen, and his little Princess was nigh five years old, and so beautiful to gaze upon that the buds of the flowers would open as she passed, so that they might look at that which was more beautiful than they were; and the wild birds would gather o'er her head, and sing their songs in honor of the fairest of children; and already the jarls spoke to their young sons and bade them strive to excel in strength and in war, so that when the time came for Edgiva to be given in marriage they might be amongst the mightiest who should strive for her hand.

Now it chanced one day that Guthred the Prince, and his sister, and Wulnoth her watcher went together into the woods nigh to the spot where they had met the bear — for they feared no bear now, nor yet the surliest of the wild boars — and while they tarried in the woodland shade Wyborga the Wise came and greeted them, and asked how they fared. And Edgiva went to her side and answered —

"O good mother, we fare well, but we have not yet heard the wonder tale, nor have we found the sign — the thorn-covered cross — though we have looked long and searched far for it."

"The sign will come, and the tale will come, Princess — all in good time will it surely come," was the answer; and then Wyborga gathered the three around her and told them of many things — of wonders from far lands, of the birds' talk and the beasts' talk, and things that men know nothing of; and while they talked there came a blowing of horns, and the King rode by on the chase, and reined his horse and spoke to the wise woman with kind, good humor.

"Greeting, Wyborga," he said. "Our watch fires are piled, but they are unlighted; our warders watch, but give no alarm; our swords are keen, but they sing no song. Surely thy wisdom was at fault when thou didst prophesy evil for the land."

"Art thou so impatient for the evil to come, O King?" she answered sadly. "It will come sure, if it comes slow. God moves not quickly."

"God?" answered the King lightly. "Why,

Wyborga, we have many gods, of whom Odin and Thor are the mightiest — which of them dost thou speak of? They move fast enough for me, for they ride the storm wind so swiftly that all the storm sisters are left far behind in their path. Which god do you speak of, Wyborga?"

Then Wyborga stooped, and with the end of her wand which she used to aid her steps she marked on the ground, and the marks that she made formed a cross.

"The God of this sign, O King," she said. And at that the King shook his head, and thought with pity that surely poor old Wyborga was mad, for of all the gods of the Northland was there none whose sign was a cross.

"Now, good mother," he said aloud, "I understand not thy sign. Canst thou give me no other by which I shall know when the time is near?"

Then Wyborga bent her head in thought, and was silent for a space, and after that she looked up and spoke, and said to the King —

"So be it. I will give you one sign, and when you see that, then be sure that soon the sword shall sing the death song in the land."

"Good!" cried the King. "Give me this sign."

Then Wyborga pointed to where Wulnoth stood near, and she said —

"This is the sign, O King. When this boy treads the birds' road, then be sure that the time has come." And at that the King laughed aloud.

"Now, by my beard," he said, "if that were possible, then would I do well to slay Wulnoth, son of Cerdic, and so the evil should never come. But no mortal foot has trodden the birds' road yet, and none ever shall, so let Wulnoth live, and let the evil be far off; and now greeting, mother."

"Greeting, King," she answered, and Wulnoth and the Prince cried "Skoal" to the King, and Edgiva kissed her hand to him, and so Hardacnute and his men rode on, laughing to themselves; for how could old Wyborga speak of any treading the birds' road without wings? and where was there a man in the world winged like the eagle or raven?

And Wulnoth and the Prince and Edgiva went back to the hall, and they wondered also, pondering over the strange things spoken by Wyborga the Wise.

And yet that which the wise woman spoke came to pass, and this was the manner of its coming. There was in the hall of King Hardacnute a young noble of Denmark, a dark, black-haired young holda, who had journeyed across the mountains seeking adventure, as he said, and had been well received and given an honorable place by the King, in spite of the warnings of his jarls, and especially of old Hald.

"A viper stings sooner or later," said the Constable, "and a Dane plays false. Kill the stranger or send him on, for we want no spying Haco here."

But the King answered that a man's hall must ever be open to the wanderer, and that it did not become brave men to be inhospitable; and so this youth,

whose name was Osbert, tarried in Lethra — a big, bragging young giant, and over fond of the drink horn.

Now, one day, as Wulnoth stood guarding the couch of Edgiva, for she had fallen asleep in the shade of the courtyard, lo, there came Osbert the Dane striding along, all flushed with wine. Now, Osbert looked upon Wulnoth with scorn, because he was a boy and a thrall, and also because he knew that his father had smitten Berwulf with his own axe in the hall of Tholk, son of Cerdic — for Osbert was of the blood of Berwulf.

Therefore, seeing Edgiva sleeping there and guarded by Wulnoth, Osbert thought to make mock of the boy, and he strode up and seized Edgiva and kissed her, so that she cried out partly in fear and partly in anger at being so rudely aroused; and Wulnoth started forward, and presented his spear, and cried fiercely —

"Set down the Lady Edgiva instantly, thou rude Dane, or I will pierce thee with this spear."

Then did Osbert place the Princess down, and he drew his heavy sword, and swung his shield from his back to his arm, and he laughed right scornfully.

"Thou wilt pierce me, thou carl. That will we see," and with that he made at Wulnoth fiercely.

But Hald the Constable was nigh, and when he heard the signs of strife he seized his great sword and strode into the courtyard, and struck the weapons apart, and demanded sternly how it came that any dared to fight in the courtyard of the King.

"This dog insulted me," cried the Dane fiercely, "and for it, by Thor, he shall die!"

"By Thor, he shall not die!" answered Hald, "until we know the truth of this business; but, for that matter, thou mightest find it hard to slay him, Dane."

So Wulnoth told how he came to have a quarrel with Osbert, and the brow of Hald grew dark when he heard of the slight to Edgiva, who now stood weeping, and he commanded the Dane to be carried before Hardacnute, that the King might say his pleasure.

And when the King heard, he said sternly —

"Osbert, stranger amongst us, hadst thou been one of my people, I would surely have had thy head smitten off. But thou art a stranger, and one who has been my guest, and I may not do this thing. Yet this I will do. Thy arms shall be taken from thee and broken as the arms of a nithing, and thou shalt be scourged with rods, a blow for every tear that the Lady Edgiva has shed, and thou shalt be driven from my lands; and if thou comest here again, then thou shalt be slain."

And the King's word was obeyed, and the Dane's weapons were broken, and he was scourged with rods, a blow for each tear that the Princess had shed; and when the scourging was ended the King bade him begone as he valued his life.

And Osbert, smarting with the beating, and mad with rage, spoke boldly and said —

"Perchance this scourging I deserve, O King, for letting the wine horn make me into a weakling; yet

bitter shall be the price paid for it, O King. For each blow of the rod blood shall flow, and the sword sing its song. Now I go as thou hast said, for indeed I could not remain longer; but be sure that thou wilt hear of me again, ere long, O King, and our greeting will be brief."

But the King laughed scornfully. "Big words from an angry boy," he said. "Get thee gone while thou art safe." And Osbert turned and went.

And a few days after that, Wulnoth and Guthred and Edgiva went to the top of the great Raven Rock, from whence they could see for many a mile, and at the foot of which the sea fretted and chafed and broke itself into foam at the high tide; and here they sat watching the sea-birds circle as they trod the birds' road down to the water, and up to the crags where their nests were built.

Not a sign of living man was there; all was peaceful and calm; and Wulnoth lay on the ground, watching the Princess, who had strayed to gather wild blossoms, whilst Guthred cautiously bent over the height, seeking to steal the eggs from a seamew's nest.

And while thus they were all serene and safe, suddenly a shadow fell upon Wulnoth, and a dark face looked down upon him, and a strong hand seized him, and the voice of Osbert hissed in his ear —

"Thou dog of a Saxon thrall — die!"

And then came the sharp bitter bite of a knife in the side, and a red mist rose before Wulnoth's eyes, and a wicked laugh echoed in his ear.

And it seemed as though he were sinking into the storm-land, when a sound called his spirit back, and that sound was the scream of the Princess Edgiva. He heard also Guthred shout, and he heard Osbert cry —

"Greeting to thee, Prince. Yonder lies thy thrall friend slain, and here is the Princess, thy sister. Go and tell thy father — for this I spare thy life — that I have sent her to the storm-land by the birds' road."

Then Wulnoth managed to stagger to his feet; and he saw, — oh, the horror of it, — he saw that nithing lift Edgiva the Beautiful high in the air, and send her over the Raven Rock into the angry sea so far below; and he uttered a great cry, and all his strength seemed to come back, so that he picked up his spear and hurled it, and it smote Osbert a fierce blow in the shoulder, making him cry out and turn and flee, plucking out the weapon and casting it aside as he went.

"Run, run," cried Wulnoth to Guthred. "Run so that the grass feels not thy touch. Nay, not after that nithing," as the Prince was starting after the wounded Osbert. "We have more to think of than him. Run to the shore and bid them launch a boat and come to the aid of Edgiva. I go to her now."

"Alas, how canst thou, my friend?" cried Guthred. "The way to the water is long and the path hard; and even if she lives now she will have died ere thou canst reach her."

"The way is short and the path easy," cried Wulnoth, as he cast off his tunic. "Tell thy father, my

lord the King, that Wyborga's words have come true, for I go by the birds' road."

And with that he stood on the verge of the mighty Raven Rock, and he saw far below, a gleam of gold in the water, as when the salmon play in the sunlit waves; and then, while Guthred stood in wonder and silence, he dived straight and true, speeding to the perishing Edgiva along the birds' road.

And this is how Osbert the Dane brought trouble into the land, and how Wulnoth fulfilled the prophecy of Wyborga the Wise.

CHAPTER IV

The Coming of Hungwar and Hubba

DOWN into the angry waves went Wulnoth, treading the birds' road; for only thus could he hope to reach Edgiva in time to save her. Down he went, and he smote the waves and sank, even to the very bottom of the depths, while the surges roared and thundered above him.

Weak was he from loss of blood and sore pain, for the knife of Osbert the Dane had bitten deeply; but strong was he with his devotion for Edgiva, and the strength overcame the weakness.

Down, down he went; then he rose and came to the surface and shook the water from his eyes and glanced around; and there, floating away now on the ebbing tide, her golden hair rising and falling on the waves, he saw the jewel of Lethra, the Princess Edgiva.

Then, cleaving the waves with strong arms, though every stroke left a crimson stain behind it, Wulnoth

pressed forward, swift as the sturgeon takes its way. His eyes were fixed upon the fair little face, which was now slowly sinking beneath the waves; and he gave a loud cry and leaped sheer out of the water, as the salmon leaps when it climbs the falls, and his right hand snatched at her and lifted her above the water again; and then the heart of Wulnoth was very glad, for he felt that once more he should save Edgiva.

And now back to the land he turned and on he swam, but the tide ran fierce, and his blood oozed fast, and the way was long, and he was faint and could swim no more. So he turned on his back and floated, letting Edgiva's golden, crowned head rest on his bosom; and so he stayed while the sea-birds flew overhead and called to him, bidding him be of good cheer, for that help was coming.

And help was coming indeed; for the Prince had run swift as the arrow flies and had cried to Hald the Constable; and now one of the King's boats was coming over the waves, and strong arms were at the oars, while Hald stood shading his eyes and crying —

"Holloa! Holloa! Wulnoth son of Cerdic! Holloa!"

And Wulnoth heard as one who hears a sound from afar, when sleep presses upon his eyes; and he tried to answer but his voice was gone. But the sea-birds aided him, for they gathered over his head, screaming shrilly; and when Hald saw that, he knew that thither he must go, and he gave order and the boat sped on and came to the spot, and there floated Wulnoth, with

Edgiva's head pillowed on his heart, and both with their eyes closed as in their last sleep.

Strong but tender hands lifted them in, and strong hands urged the boat back; and they were taken to the King's hall and tended by the Queen herself; for Queen Wulfreda was skilled in healing. And search was made through the land for the nithing who had done this thing; yet, though they rode throughout all the King's borders, they found no trace of Osbert the Dane.

And Wyborga the Wise also came, bringing medicines of her own; and so soon the sick ones awoke from their slumber, and Wulnoth was commanded to come before the King.

And there, in the great hall, with all the jarls around him, the King praised Wulnoth, and asked him what he would choose as his gift, and said that now he would take the thrall's collar from his neck.

But Wulnoth made answer, and his voice was low and sad, and he said that the collar should not be taken from his neck, but that instead of gifts he should be scourged, because he, being armed, and the Princess's watcher, had suffered harm to come to her.

"Not honor, but disgrace, do I deserve, O King," he said; "for I have proved myself a false watcher."

"Now, that may not be," cried the King, "for none would have dared to tread the birds' road as thou hast done." But to that Hald said —

"There is reason in the boy's words, O King. Therefore let it be as he says; but for his reward take the collar from his father's neck, and give Cerdic five

hides of good land, so that he shall be noble." And all the redesmen said that the Constable's words were good words and that it was a wise saying.

So the King commanded that Cerdic should be given five hides of good land and that the thrall collar should be taken from his neck; and then Reinbaldus the scald made a song and sang it in the great hall while the King feasted, and this was the song he sang —

Over the storm wave, over the swan bath,
Cerdic the Saxon came, to Lethra fleeing
From the fierce anger of Berwulf the viking,
Fleeing with Olfa, and the child Wulnoth;
Thus came young Wulnoth to fair Lethra.

Wulnoth the boy thrall, friend of Prince Guthred,
Straying with Edgiva deep in the woodland,
Then came the waster roaring against them,
Fierce in his anger, he the death giver.
Woe for Prince Guthred! woe for Edgiva!
Swift to their succor came Wulnoth hasting,
Armed with a knife alone, slew he the monster,
Dead now before them lies the wood waster.

Nithing and traitor, Osbert the Dane came,
Wounded with coward blow, Wulnoth the watcher,
Cast from the Raven Rock, Lethra's Edgiva,
Into the stormy waves hurled he the fair one.
"Thus, tell ye Lethra's King, Osbert repays him."
Laughter to sorrow turned when the spear bit him,
Fleeing, like frightened hare, swiftly the Dane ran,
Wulnoth's love token bore he away with him.

Far 'neath the Raven Rock, in the wild swan bath,
There is Edgiva, Edgiva the Beautiful—
Who from the death sleep backward shall bear her?
Who by the birds' road rushes to save her?

Who from the angry waves bravely doth bear her,
While his own crimson blood marks out his pathway?
Wulnoth, Cerdic's son, Wulnoth the watcher,
He trod the birds' road, saving Edgiva,
Skoal then to Cerdic's son,
And skoal to Edgiva.

Such was the song which Reinbaldus sang; and the soldiers and the people said it was a fair song and a true song, and that Wulnoth was worthy of honor. And they called the Raven's Rock "Wulnoth's Road," because of the great leap which he took thence into the swan bath to rescue Edgiva.

Yet still Wulnoth himself felt darkened, for he reflected that he, being the Princess's watcher, ought to have been standing on guard rather than lying there taking his ease so that Osbert the Dane could come upon them; and though many strove to banish such thoughts from his mind, old Hald said —

"Let be. The boy will be all the better for thinking on it. I will warrant me he will never now be found asleep at his post, let the watch be as long as it will."

But now King Hardacnute was indeed grave, for here was Wyborga's prophecy fulfilled, and he looked for the foe to come.

But no enemy came, no, not for a week, nor two, nor a full month; and then, one morning, just as the King was beginning to think that it was but a fable after all, far out on the Westarweg six long ships appeared, each with its huge sail, each with its long pennon, each with its sides bright with the long rows of shields hung over the bulwarks, each propelled by banks of long

oars; and from the foremost one floated a mighty banner with a great black raven upon it, so that all might know that these were ships of the sea-kings and pirates, lords from Juteland and Denmark.

"Now," said old Hald, as he stood on the tower and gazed seaward long and hard, "if these be the ships of Regner Lodbrok, the son of Sigurd, it will be a hard fight and a long that we shall have; for of all the sea-kings that carry fire and sword, there is none so mighty as the dragon slayer."

"Methinks 't is the banner of the son of Sigurd," said the King, who stood beside him, and old Hald nodded.

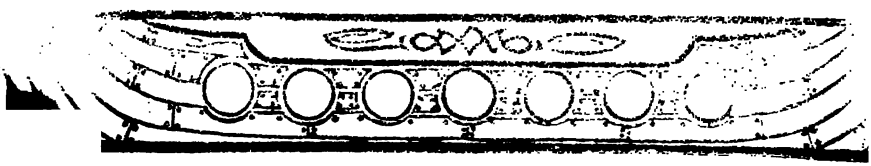
"By land or by sea, O King?" he asked. And the King mused —

"By sea if it would save the land from blood," he said, "but I fear it will not. My word is, meet them on land."

"And ere they land, every ship that Lethra possesses will be in flames," answered Hald. "If we must lose our ships, better to man them and lose them in the man's game than to sit like sheep and see them burn." And the King answered —

"Be it so."

So the war horns sounded, and the beacons blazed, and all men came trooping in, and the women and children gathered in the King's hall, for there alone might be found safety for them. And all the cattle were driven into the courtyard, or else turned loose in the deep forest where the foe would not be likely to find them.



"Guthred, my friend and brother," said Wulnoth, as he stood by the side of the Prince, "so at last we are really to see the man's game played and to take part in it! Is this Regner Lodbrok so mighty, then?"

"I have heard my father say that there lives no greater warrior, and that though he is terrible in battle he is just and loves brave men, and not cruel like some — not like his two sons, Hungwar and Hubba; for where they go there is the cry of the woman and the child, and the scream of the tortured one. Thou knowest that it was Regner Lodbrok who slew the dragon?"

"Nay," answered Wulnoth. "I know not the story. Tell it to me, I pray."

"This is how the scalds have it," answered the Prince. "You must know that this Regner Lodbrok, the son of Sigurd, loved a lady named Thora, who was the fairest woman who ever lived —"

"Not fairer than our Edgiva," cried Wulnoth jealously, and the Prince smiled.

"That I cannot say, seeing that Edgiva my sister is but a child, and this lady was a woman. But be that as it may. A warlock took the Lady Thora and carried her away, and left her guarded by a fiery dragon — a dreadful monster whom no man could overcome because it belched out flames at them. But Regner Lodbrok[1] heard of this, and he swore by Thor that he

[1] This story of Regner Lodbrok is one of the most noted in all the old sagas, and there are many concerning his wonderful deeds. Regner was called *Lodbrok* on account of thus wrapping himself up in skins to fight the dragon. Some old writers who wrote in Latin translate the name into *Villosa femoralia*, which means hairy trousers.

would slay the monster and free the Lady Thora. So he took skins of oxen, and thereof he made clothing to cover all his body, from the feet to the neck, and thus covered he went to the cave and rushed at the dragon. The monster spat fire at him, but Regner Lodbrok held his shield before his face, and the flames scorched the skins but harmed not him, and he buried his sword in the dragon's heart and slew him, and freed the Lady Thora and carried her back with him."

"How brave of him!" cried Wulnoth. "Surely 't was a man's deed, and if such a foe is coming, thou and I, O Prince, shall see some great deeds done to-day."

"We may, Wulnoth, my friend," answered Guthred. "But remember what Wyborga the Wise has said. In this battle the King, my father, is to be slain, and I am to become a slave," and at that Wulnoth had no word to say, for the grief of it was too much for him.

"Wulnoth," the Prince went on sadly, "if this thing is true, will you promise not to forget me? And if you may, afterwards come and seek me out and aid me. Wulnoth, we have been friends and brothers, will you promise me this?"

"That will I promise, Guthred," answered Wulnoth. "As soon as my trust to Edgiva is over, I will come."

"Poor Edgiva," sighed the Prince. "I wonder what fate will be in store for her."

Now, while the boys talked, all was hurry and

bustle, and Hald went to the ships with the sailors, and King Hardacnute gathered the army on the shore, and Cerdic, and Hith, and Æthelmar, and others went into the hold to be able to succor the rest, should they have to flee, and then the war horns blew again, and the ships went to sea to meet the foe.

And when they neared each other, old Hald, standing in the prow, called across the water and said —

"Greeting, strangers! Sea-kings and pirates I trow ye are, and your message is war; yet tell us whom we war against lest we shame you by saying ye are nameless men."

Then a great warrior, yet a young man, standing in the poop of one of the foremost of the foe ships, laughed and replied —

"Little care we what you call us, warrior, yet know that we are the sons of Regner, called Lodbrok, Hungwar and Hubba, and we come to avenge injury done to Osbert the Dane. We come to war against Hardacnute for sheltering a thrall of Berwulf's named Cerdic and his family; and we come to carry away a fair child Edgiva, that when she is maiden grown she may mate with the best of the sea-kings' warriors. Now dost thou yield?"

"Thus do I yield, you wolves of Denmark," replied Hald, hurling his spear, but Hungwar caught it on his shield, and then the battle commenced.

Now, we have no time to talk long of that battle, for we have to follow the song of Wulnoth; but it was a brave and fierce one, when many hero deeds were

done, and when the sword sang its death-song again and again. Yet in the end the ships of Hardacnute were destroyed and his sailors perished, and the Danes ran their own ships aground, and swarmed out to meet the forces of Hardacnute on land.

And there, on land, a mighty war was waged, and many heroes fell; yet still the victory was with the Danes, and the men of Lethra were driven back, leaving many slain on the seashore.

Now while this battle was raging, Wulnoth was in the King's courtyard, when a man touched him on the arm; and the man was big and brawny and shaggy like some wild berserker, and this man said to Wulnoth —

"Are you Wulnoth, the watcher of the Princess?" and to this Wulnoth answered that he was.

"Then," said the man, "I have a message for thee, O Wulnoth," and Wulnoth asked whom the message was from.

"It is from Wyborga the Wise," answered the stranger, "and thus she says: 'Fire and sword are come, O Wulnoth, and by to-night will Edgiva be without father or mother. Now, therefore, bring her to me, and I will shelter her in safety, for Hungwar the Dane has sworn to carry her off and to make her his slave child. If my words are wrong, then can you have her back; but if they are right, then will the King know that his daughter is spared the fate which shall befall his son.'"

Now, when Wulnoth heard this, he sped to the

Queen, and he told her all the truth. And Wulfreda answered and said —

"Now, if these words are true, and if the King my husband perish, then shall I rejoice to have the death-song sung to me also; and if that be so, then shall it be well that Edgiva has a friend to aid her. Therefore, take her to Wyborga, Wulnoth."

So Wulnoth and Guthred took Edgiva the Beautiful, and carried her away into the forest and gave her to Wyborga, and Wyborga said that they had done well. And then said Wulnoth —

"Why should not Guthred tarry here also, good mother, so that he will be safe?"

But Wyborga shook her head.

"Guthred must go back," she said, "for so the lines of his runes run. But let Guthred be of good cheer and brave heart, for he shall have a kingdom and a name in the end, and ye three shall meet again."

"When shall we meet?" cried Guthred. And for answer Wyborga again drew the cross on the ground and said —

"When you all understand this, then shall you meet, and then shall you be united."

And that was all she could say. So Wulnoth and Guthred hurried back, for the blood was hot in Wulnoth's veins, and he longed to be in the man's game. And they got back to the hall just as King Hardacnute's men were being driven in, and there they saw the brothers Hungwar and Hubba, the sons of Regner, mighty warriors, with long black moustachios and

sweeping hair, and arms like the stout branches of an oak.

And also there did Wulnoth see Osbert the Dane, and he cried to him in a voice that rang over the din of the fight —

"Hi, there! Greeting to you, Osbert, nithing and attacker of little children. Come hither, for I have a greeting for thee, unless thou dost still fear my spear."

"By Thor's hammer!" growled Hungwar as he heard this. "Thou must answer this, Osbert. Go thou, whilst we rest a space, and silence that wolf cub." But Osbert looked as though he liked not his task.

Still he could not escape, and he advanced towards the keep; and Wulnoth sprang from the wall and ran to meet him.

"Now, now, Osbert," he cried, "never have I slain a man yet, but thou wilt do for a start!" And Osbert answered with a thrust of his spear.

But Wulnoth caught it on his shield and turned it aside, and then he struck once, and once only, and the blow pierced through shield and arm behind it, and Osbert gave a bitter cry and fell.

"Mercy! mercy!" he cried, and the Danes howled with anger. But the wild war madness was in Wulnoth's blood now, and he drew his sword and plunged it into the nithing's throat, crying out, "So shall all nithings and Danish pirates perish!"

"By Troth!" cried Hubba, "that is a gamesome young wolf. We must have him alive." But Wulnoth

had fled back, and was let into the hold by the men, who cried "Skoal" to him.

And then did the man's game begin again, and still the fight was with the vikings. And Cerdic was slain by a sling stone, and one after another of the King's champions went to the storm-world, and the flames burst from the roofs, and the cries of the women sounded on the air, for the vikings slew and spared none.

In the courtyard Wulfreda stood by her husband's side and shielded him while he fought, and around him lay a ring of Danish slain. But he fell at last, and Hubba himself smote off his head.

"This is the King's son!" cried Hungwar, seizing Guthred. "I have an oath as regards this boy and his sister. They shall be thralls in my castle." But to that Guthred answered boldly —

"Thou Danish pirate, though thou hast me in thy power, thou shalt never have my sister, for she is beyond thy reach."

"That we will see," answered Hungwar. "Bind this boy with chains, and take him to my long ship."

Then he caught sight of Wulnoth, who had fought as a man fights and was sore wounded, and he cried aloud —

"By my beard, but 't is our little warrior wolf! — a boy, but thou must be of us. Now, methinks, thou art the son of that Cerdic that we came to seek, for thou hast Saxon blood in thee I will swear, and thou hast thrall collar on. But thou art a man and we will spare

thee, and thou shalt be my servant. What dost thou say to that?"

"No servant of thine will I be, thou pirate of Denmark!" cried Wulnoth. "Thou art a champion and a sea-king, and I but a boy and a thrall, and only one of a few left of all Lethra's soldiers, yet thus and thus do I answer thee." And with that he rushed at the great Dane, and smote twice with his broken sword; and the first blow gashed Hungwar's brow, and the second pierced his arm, so that the champion of Denmark reeled backwards and would have fallen but that a soldier smote Wulnoth down with his axe, so that they thought him slain.

Then did the Danes gather together all the treasure of Lethra for their plunder, and they slew all, man, woman, and child, as many as they found, and they set fire to each house and hall, and spread the red flames through the land; and then they sailed away, and of all the people they took only some fair maids and the Prince, who Hungwar had sworn should live as a thrall, for the blows which Hardacnute had caused to be laid upon the back of Osbert the Dane.

Now, this is how the words of Wyborga the Wise came true, and Hungwar and Hubba carried fire and sword through the land of Lethra and took Guthred the Prince prisoner back to Denmark when they went away.

CHAPTER V

Of Wulnoth's Schooling

HEN Wulnoth opened his eyes again he was in a cool cave, through the entrance of which he could see the green glades of the forest, and there before him sat Wyborga the Wise, while Princess Edgiva played near by with a little wild fawn.

He raised himself on his elbow and glanced around in wonder, hardly able to remember anything of what had gone beside; and Wyborga rose and brought him a cooling drink, saying gently —

"So thou art better, Wulnoth! For many days has thy spirit hovered between life and death, but thou hast turned back, as I knew thou wouldst — for thy work is before thee, and thou must help to do great things."

"What things must I do, O mother?" he asked. And Wyborga took up her favorite symbol again — a little wooden cross — and planted it in the earth.

"So must thou help to plant this in another land, Wulnoth," she said. And he shook his head somewhat impatiently.

"Oh, good mother, I am weary of symbols and dark sayings. Tell me in plain words, for as for thy cross, I can make nothing of it."

"Not yet, Wulnoth. The time is not yet," she said. "But now thou must rest and grow strong, for there is much to do."

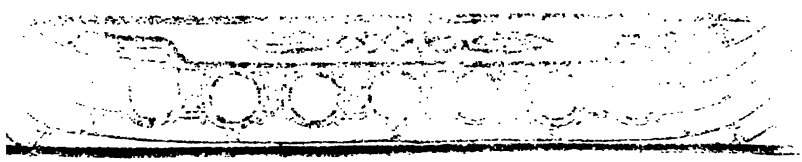
"And how went the fight after I was struck down?" he asked. "Methinks there was little fighting left to do."

"All too little," she answered. "Of all in Lethra, the Danes left not one alive saving only a few who escaped to the woods. Thy father and mother, and the King and Queen, and Hald and all the mighty ones have perished, and Lethra is ruin and ashes and desolation to-day. Such is the work of Hungwar and Hubba."

"Make me strong, O mother! make me strong if thou hast any skill!" cried Wulnoth. "For I will follow those pirates to the end of the world, if need be, and I will bring again Guthred, the Prince, from captivity."

"Not yet, Wulnoth. Thou hast much to learn, and Guthred has much to learn, ere ye two meet again, for so I read your lives. Now sleep, and when thou awakest, I will tell thee what there is to be done first."

So Wulnoth slept; and for a day and night and half a second day, he opened not his eyes. But then



when he awoke he felt strong again, and he rose and said to Wyborga, who sat in the entrance of the cave —

"Good mother, I am strong, and I thank thee. Didst thou come and search me out?"

"I sent one to do it, Wulnoth," she answered. "One who found thee nigh to death and bore thee hither to me."

"And thou hast cured me! Now, mother, I am, as thou knowest, the watcher of the Princess, and though she has no realm to come to now, methinks she is still my Princess, and I must do my work. But then I am sworn to seek my friend the Prince. Now both I cannot do; therefore give me thy rede and tell me what to do."

"Wulnoth," answered the wise woman, "the Princess is very fair, and as she grows older there will be none so fair." And Wulnoth answered that it was so.

"Moreover, Wulnoth," said Wyborga, "methinks thou dost love her very much." And again he answered —

"She is my Princess, and I would give every drop of my blood for her."

"Ay, truly, and methinks the Princess is fond of thee. Now, thrones and power are small things. How wouldst thou like to give up all such thoughts, Wulnoth, and to abide here, and perchance when Edgiva is maid grown, to take her for thy wife?" and Wyborga looked gravely at Wulnoth.

But Cerdic's son drew himself up, and he answered quickly —

"Now, mother, that is a hard question, for of itself

there would be no better thing than to live in peace beneath the green wood with Edgiva for my wife. But this may not be. For think, is it meet for a king's daughter to live her life like savage maiden? and is it right for a thrall, and a thrall's son, to ask a princess to be his mate? And is it meet that I should do this thing, even if I might, and forget my oath to the Prince, her brother? No, mother, this thing may not be."

Then Wyborga smiled and said —

"Thou hast answered well, Wulnoth, and this thing I said but to prove thee. Know if thou hadst yielded still it would never have been. But listen to my words. Thou canst not seek the Prince yet, for thou wilt have far to go, and thou wilt have to go amongst the champions of the earth. Thou must learn much first, Wulnoth, and be patient in thy learning."

Then answered Wulnoth and said, "What must I learn, mother, and who shall be my schoolmaster?"

So Wyborga went to the door and called softly, and a shadow fell before the entrance of the cave, and there entered the wild-looking man who had come to Wulnoth on the day of the battle.

"Wulnoth," he said, "I am Osth the berserker and the giant," — and truly he was a gigantic man, — "and Wyborga the Wise has bidden me to teach thee if thou wilt be taught; but the time will be long and the work hard, for he who would gain experience must gain it at hard cost, and he who would conquer others must conquer self."

Then said Wulnoth, "For how long must I learn,

Osth?" and the berserker replied, "Until thou art perfect."

Then did Edgiva come to Wulnoth and place her arms round his neck, and call him her good Wulnoth, and bid him go; and Wyborga promised that each new moon he should come and see them in the cave. So Wulnoth consented and went away with Osth into the high mountain, along the goats' road, which is hard to climb and weary to walk.

And there in a cave the boy dwelt with the wild man, and he drank no wine nor milk, but only the clear water of the stream. And he ate wild fruit and goat's flesh; and each morning Osth set him to roll great stones up the hill, and as fast as he got them to the top they rolled down again, until at length he cried in anger —

"Of what use is this, Osth? The stones will not remain at the top, and if they did they are no use there," but to that Osth only grunted, and said he that would succeed must labor.

"It shall not be my fault if I do not succeed," thought Wulnoth, and he set to work again, and rolled the stones all day long though he could not see any use in it, until one day the giant said to him —

"Seest thou yon oak tree, Wulnoth? Canst pull off a branch at one wrench?"

"Neither I nor any man could do that," answered Wulnoth; but the berserker said —

"Try."

So Wulnoth went to the oak, and he took a firm

grip on a branch and pulled, and lo, the branch came away.

"Whence have I got this strength?" cried the youth in wonder. And the giant answered, "Rolling stones. Each stone added a little, and each little joined the rest, until thou canst do this. Thou must learn another lesson now."

So Osth set him to leap the precipices and to descend from point to point, until he was as surefooted as the goat, and then one day he bade him strip and wrestle.

Now Wulnoth wrestled hard, but he could not throw the giant, and each time the giant threw him so that he lost heart, and said —

"What use wrestling with thee, O Osth? I shall never conquer thee." But the giant answered with a grunt —

"He who would succeed must labor," and again Wulnoth was silenced.

And one day there came a bear, and the giant said, "Canst wrestle with yonder honey-finder, Wulnoth?"

"Nay," said Wulnoth. "Neither can any man." But Osth answered, "Go and try."

So Wulnoth went to the bear, and the honey-finder rose up and opened wide his paws. But Wulnoth took a good grip and squeezed his ribs, and threw him down, so that the honey-finder got up and ran off grunting. And Wulnoth said —

"Whence have I got this cunning?"

"Through being thrown by me," answered Osth. "Thou must learn another lesson now."

And he set him pulling against himself, until at length he could take a bullock by the horns and pull against it, and cast it over the hill, and so, day by day, did the giant make him work until his bones ached and his limbs grew weary, but he grew strong and mighty, and could run all day and not stop, and climb the steepest hill, and leap the widest chasm, and wield a club in either hand, and shatter a rock with every blow; and after each task in which he succeeded the giant laughed and grunted, and said that it was well.

And at every full moon Wulnoth went down to see Wyborga and Edgiva, and it seemed to him that Edgiva grew more and more in grace each time he saw her, until he cried to Wyborga —

"Oh, Wyborga, tell me what this thing does mean! A few months ago and Edgiva was a child, and now she is a woman, and so beautiful that it melts the heart to look at her."

Then did Wyborga laugh and answer —

"The riddle is not hard, Wulnoth. It is thus: For every moon that thou hast been yonder a year has sped. Canst thou not see that thou art a man?"

"I never thought of that, for the giant has kept me so busy," he answered. "I have been seven months with him."

"Seven years," answered Wyborga. "So swiftly has time flown. Thou art twenty-four, and Edgiva is fifteen now."

But then did Wulnoth look wroth, and he said —

"This is all well, mother, but what of my promise? I said that I would seek out my friend, and here I have tarried playing for seven years, and he is a slave. I have somewhat to settle with the sons of Regner, and seven years have been wasted."

"Not wasted," answered Wyborga. "Thou art now fitted for thy work. And now, before thou dost start, go and talk with Edgiva, for she has been learning too, and she now knows the wonder tale of which I spoke, and it has made darkness light, and sorrow has become joy, and weakness strength with her."

So Wulnoth went to Edgiva and said —

"My Princess, Wyborga has sent me to talk with you, that I may hear the story which she says you know. Though before she said that in another land alone I should hear it."

"Wulnoth," answered Edgiva gently, "there is hearing with the ears, and hearing with the heart; and which hearing thine will be I know not yet. But sit down beside me and listen to my story."

So Wulnoth obeyed, and Edgiva told him her story, and it was such a story as he had never thought of. For she told him how the gods of the North were false gods, and how there was but one true God Who made all things. And she told how this God had sent His Son, who was the Lord Christ, and the Bretwalda of all angels; and how men had put Him to death on the cross, and crowned Him with thorns, and how for His love He had suffered and not destroyed them. And she

spoke of how His subjects must be lowly and gentle and forgiving and meek, until at last Wulnoth jumped up and cried in impatience —

"What story is this you tell me, O Edgiva the Beautiful? This is a tale for nithings and cowards! What man would stand and be buffeted and spat upon if his hand could grasp a good sword and strike a good blow? I like not the tale, and I like not Wyborga for telling it to thee. The gods of our Northland were men truly, and did heroes' deeds; but as for this Lord of thine, methinks he deserved to die for the nithing and the coward that He was. Put such things away, Edgiva. I go to search for thy brother. I have sworn, and I must fulfil; and thou canst either tarry here, or, if thou wilt come with me, I will be thy servant and thrall."

But Edgiva shook her head. "I want not servant or thrall, Wulnoth," she said. And he asked —

"Then what dost thou want, Edgiva?"

"That I may not tell thee until thine own heart finds out, and thou wilt never truly find out until thou dost hear the wonder tale."

"I have just heard it," answered Wulnoth, "and I have told thee that I like it not. Fit for women and nithings perhaps, but for men and heroes it is an idle story. Edgiva, I must go to seek thy brother."

"That I know, Wulnoth," she said. "May fortune speed thy seeking. Now farewell."

"But what wilt thou do?" he cried. "Wilt thou tarry here with Wyborga?"

"I shall do as my Lord wills," she answered. And

at that Wulnoth was angry, for who was this whom Edgiva called Lord? What lover had sought her in the woodlands, he wondered.

He strode away in wrath and pain, but then he thought that after all he had no right to be angry, for he was but a born thrall, and Edgiva was a princess.

Still, in those dark moments he knew that he loved her, and he felt that he must go back and tell her, and beg her to let him be her servant for ever.

So back, through the moonlight, Wulnoth went to the cave and called to Wyborga and to Edgiva, but no answer came. Then he entered and looked around, and no one was there!

He went into the woods and cried aloud, but only the echoes answered, and the night owl cried, and then he sat down and wept, for he thought that indeed Edgiva had gone to her Lord, and that he would see her no more.

And then he went back to the cave, and there was a strange stillness in the place, as though it mourned that Edgiva had gone — as though in going she had taken all life and light with her; and he sat down and wept, and cried her name aloud, and said that he loved her and would surely die now; and then he looked up and he saw Wyborga some way off in the wood, and she called to him and spoke —

"Listen, Wulnoth," she said. "The time for work is now, and you must wander forth to seek for Guthred. As for Edgiva, she has gone where her Lord wills, and some day you will meet her again, when you have fulfilled your task."

"My task!" he cried. "What task is that, Wyborga? To find the Prince?"

"Nay, more than that," she replied. "You have said that the Lord Christ is weakling and nithing. Now, therefore, go and search in the world, and when you have found the strongest and the noblest, and the bravest of all Lords, then know that you will see Edgiva again, and that your task will be nearly done."

"But, Wyborga!" he cried. But she had gone — the darkness of the forest had swallowed her up, and he was alone.

He went back to the giant's cave, but Osth was gone also, and he was alone — alone without a single friend, not knowing whither to go to search for Guthred, nor who might be the bravest and mightiest Lord upon earth.

Now, this is how Wulnoth served seven years with Osth the giant, and this is how he lost Edgiva the Beautiful and Wyborga the Wise.

CHAPTER VI

Of Wulnoth's Strange Wrestling in the Place of Desolation

FOR a day and a night did Wulnoth remain in that place, giving way to his sorrow, for a strange weakness had taken possession of him, and it seemed as though there was naught left to live for in this world. And in the long night hours did evil voices whisper in his ear, as though the wicked warlocks counselled him, and the storm sisters sped by on the wind, and they also seemed to mock at him.

"Of what use is it to think of searching for thy friend?" the voices said. "Of what use to remember Edgiva the Beautiful, who is a king's daughter? Of what use to remember the words of Wyborga, who has mocked thee? Thou art nameless and landless and thrall born, and hast only thy strength and no wisdom. Go to the hills and join the nameless ones and the masterless men, and be their leader, and spread fire and carry sword, and make thyself a name that shall be

feared, and put all these dreams from thee. There are fair maidens to capture and strongholds to take, and thus thou shalt be strong. But if thou dost wander after the friend whom thou mayst never find, or seek the great one who may never be met with, then thou shalt be known as the Wanderer only, and no scald shall sing a song to thee."

And Wulnoth, seated there in the darkness of the forest, said to himself that this thing was best, and that he would go and join the nameless ones and the masterless men, and become a robber-lord to be feared.

But when the day dawned and the night shadows fled, then the birds began to sing in the woodlands and the earth smiled again, and better voices came to Wulnoth and spoke in the land-breeze and sang in the bird-song and whispered in the leaves-talk; and all these voices said —

"Why tarry here, O Wulnoth, when all the work is before thee — when the hours pass and are not used? Look up, and rise up, and go forth and begin."

"Yet I know not where to begin," said Wulnoth, and the voices seemed to answer —

"One step at a time, and the longest journey is completed. Rise up and search, for the seeker shall be the finder, if in seeking he weary not."

"Now," thought Wulnoth, "this is surely right, for I do but waste time sitting idle, and even if I seek the masterless men, I shall not find them by staying here."

So Wulnoth rose, and he plucked a stout branch

from a tree for a weapon, in case any sought to harm him; and he strode through the forest and came to the road, and then he knew that it was the road he had often walked by the side of Edgiva the Beautiful — the road back to Lethra.

"I will go and see the King's hall," he said. "Perchance some dwell there even now who may tell me of Guthred."

But alas, when he reached the place where Lethra had flourished, all was silence and ashes and desolation. Here stood the blackened walls, and there lay beam and iron, while down at the fiord, the weed-covered wrecks of the long ships could still be seen.

No living thing was there, for the work of the sea-kings had been thorough, and the vengeance of Hungwar and Hubba had been complete, and Lethra was the place of desolation now.

Then a deep anger filled the heart of Wulnoth as he stood surveying the ruins, and he cried aloud —

"I will find these pirates and make them pay for this, and I will find Guthred the Prince and set him back on his throne, and I will find Edgiva the Beautiful, though I have to wander the world o'er to do it."

And then a deep mocking laugh sounded, and he turned to behold who thus jeered at his words, for tears were gone and weakness had fled, and his heart burned for the man's game.

And there, seated amidst the dust and black ashes of the place of desolation, he saw a man — a great and mighty man — who sat and eyed him; and Wulnoth's

heart was full of wonder, for this man was so like himself that it was as though he looked upon his own form in the clear forest pool or the well's cool depths.

"Why dost thou laugh at me? and who art thou who art so like myself that thou mightest be my brother? and by what name art thou called?" he cried. And the other laughed again.

"I am called Wulnoth, stranger," he answered. "Wulnoth, Cerdic's son, thou talker of big words and doer of little deeds." And at that Wulnoth answered in hot rage —

"Now in that thou liest, whoever thou art, for I am Wulnoth, Cerdic's son."

"Thou Cerdic's son! Thou art a nithing to weep at sorrow's touch, to faint at difficulty, and to listen to night voices. Thou Cerdic's son!"

"Now," thought Wulnoth, "who am I? Has Wyborga cast some strange spell upon me, or did the night wanderers bewitch me in yonder forest? And if I be not Wulnoth, then who am I?"

"Well, wanderer," this strange man said at length, "dost thou own that thou hast spoken falsely? Dost thou still call thyself Cerdic's son?"

"That do I," replied Wulnoth. "Whoever thou art, thou art not Wulnoth."

"Whoever thou art, thou liest," came the reply. "I am Wulnoth, and I mean to gather a band of masterless men, and in this place of desolation to build Lethra again and here to reign as king."

"That thou shalt not," answered Wulnoth quickly.

And the other laughed and asked him why he should not.

"Because I am Wulnoth," replied he, "and because I go to seek Guthred the Prince, and to bring him here to reign in his father's halls once more."

"That thou shalt not," answered the other. "It seems to me, nameless one who callest thyself Wulnoth, that there is not room for us twain in the world, and that one of us must conquer the other. Therefore cast aside thy club and come holmgang with me. Yea, here in the place of desolation, with no arms but our strength, will we fight until one shall overcome the other."

"I am well content," replied Wulnoth, and he cast aside the club. "Let it be as thou sayest, thou who callest thyself Wulnoth and who speakest a lie."

"Deeds, not words, thou man with a woman's tongue," growled the other; and then they faced each other, and gripped, and swayed, and strained, while the black ashes and the gray dust of the ruins of Lethra rose in clouds about them.

Now Wulnoth was strong, and he thought within himself that after his wrestling with Osth the giant, and his conquering of the bear, this would be but an easy matter, but to his surprise he found that the stranger was strong as he, and knew every one of his tricks, and could match him in every way, so that Wulnoth, strive as he might, could gain no victory.

All the day they fought, until the evening shadows crept from the cloudland, and then they paused, and

flung themselves panting on the ground, and the stranger laughed and said —

"Well wrestled, Wanderer. Thou hast tried, but thou canst not succeed, and when the day dawns we will fight again, and I shall conquer thee, and then I will either slay thee or make thee my thrall, and thou shalt know that I am Wulnoth, Cerdic's son."

"Though you conquer and slay me," answered Wulnoth, "that will I not know. You may be warlock or mountain troll who has stolen my shape and who uses magic against me, but Wulnoth, the son of Cerdic, you are not."

"Tarry till the morning and I will prove it," said the other. But Wulnoth answered —

"Nay, why should we tarry; by night as by day can we fight. Come, prove it now."

"I am hungry and weary, and desire to quaff from the wine horn," the other replied. "Let us do that first and fight afterwards."

"Not so," answered Wulnoth. "We will make an end of this matter, and that at once."

"Now, evil seize thee," growled the other. "For this I will surely slay thee. Yet fight, if it is in thy mind to do so."

So they gripped again, and wrestled, and strove, yet still Wulnoth could gain no victory; and as the night deepened, it seemed that the other grew the stronger, so that he cast Wulnoth to the earth and laughed and said —

"I conquer! I conquer, Wanderer, and bitter shall

be the drink in which you pledge me. Now cry for mercy."

"I cry for no mercy," answered Wulnoth, speaking short and hoarse. "Come, let us make an end of this."

So there on the ground they wrestled, the stranger on top and Wulnoth beneath seeking to cast him off, and so they struggled until the sun rose; and then stronger and stronger Wulnoth seemed to grow, and weaker and weaker the stranger became, until he fell, and said —

"I can fight no more. Thou hast beaten me. Yet thou wouldst not have done this save for that shadow."

He pointed, as he spoke, to the earth, and Wulnoth looked and wondered; for two of the timbers of the ruined king's hall still stood, and they caught the beams of the rising sun, and upon the ground their shadows fell just where the two had struggled, and the shadows formed — a cross, the sign of the weak one whom Wulnoth had called nithing!

Then cried Wulnoth and said —

"O stranger, who didst take my name and whom I have conquered, can you tell me this riddle, for I am weary of mysteries. Whence comes it that yonder shadow made me strong and you weak?"

"'T is the sign of the mightiest and the strongest," answered the other, and at that Wulnoth laughed aloud in mockery —

"'T is the sign of one who was a nithing," he said;

"and yet, if it made me strong, why did it not make thee strong also?"

"Thou wouldst not understand even if I told thee, Wanderer," was the reply. And Wulnoth spoke again —

"Now confess that thou didst lie when thou didst take my name." But the other replied —

"I lied not, for of a surety I am Wulnoth, Cerdic's son!"

"Now this passes all!" cried Wulnoth. "Then who may I be, if thou art Wulnoth?"

"The Wanderer, and thou shalt wander until thy task is done. Yet remember that again thou hast rejected the Strong, and called Him the weak. Hither was I sent to meet thee and to conquer thee, and thou hast conquered me. Well for thee that thou hast conquered Wulnoth, Cerdic's son, for unless thou hadst done this, thou wouldst never have conquered others; and it was for this purpose that Wyborga the Wise sent thee to tarry with Osth the giant to learn strength."

"Thou wilt bewilder me with words," cried Wulnoth impatiently. "I tell thee that I am Wulnoth. Moreover, it was Wulnoth whom Osth did teach, and since thou ownest that he taught me, thou ownest that I am Wulnoth, and thou provest thyself false."

"I may not explain this to thee," was the answer. "Some day thou shalt understand it."

"Some day!" was Wulnoth's angry reply. "Why are all the good things promised thus? The future must be stored with them, and the now has never a one."

"The future has all golden store, Wulnoth, since so thou wilt have it. And now farewell."

"Not so fast," cried Wulnoth. "I have conquered thee, and thou art my man now."

"And truly so, and truly I shall serve thee even though thou mayst not know it. Yet beware of one thing — thou must watch me, for I may yet turn and smite thee. I tell thee, Wulnoth, that I am thy best friend and thy worst foe — weak am I and yet I am thy strength. Seek not to keep me now."

"Oh, go thy way! Thou art like all the rest, filled with riddles and dark sayings. Yet before thou dost go tell me one thing, and plainly, if it be in thee to speak to the point."

"Ask thy question," said the other. And Wulnoth went on —

"Whither must I turn to seek for Guthred son of Hardacnute, who was King of Lethra in his day — canst thou tell me that?"

"By Hungwar and by Hubba was he carried off," answered the other. "From them must you seek him. Seek the Danes, Wanderer, yet in seeking hold thy counsel, for Hungwar hath a long memory, and his face still beareth a scar of a wound made by a broken sword once in this very spot. And, moreover, the names of Cerdic, thrall of Berwulf, and of Wulnoth, the son of Cerdic, might be remembered. So keep thy counsel, and call thyself the Wanderer if thou come to the Danish sea-kings." And with that this strange man turned and hastened away, leaving

Wulnoth seated there wondering, yet sore spent with his fight.

"Now, this is passing strange," Wulnoth reflected. "Yet the advice is good, for where shall I glean tidings of the Prince save from the Danes who carried him off?"

Then he paused a moment and cried out—

"Now, by my word! Who so mighty and strong as Regner Lodbrok? There is Wyborga's rede! I will seek Regner Lodbrok the Dane, and to him will I give service."

Then he rose, and lo, his eye fell upon the shadow again, and he frowned and shook his head.

"There is some dark rede in all this," he mused, "and I must try and come by its meaning. 'T is but a shadow, yet as it fell upon me I grew strong and conquered yonder strange being."

He stood pressing his feet idly into the dust and pondering, and presently his foot struck something buried in the ashes, and he stooped and put down his hand. And then he uttered a cry of joy, for he drew out a mighty sword with good handle, fashioned so that the fingers could grip it well, and with long, well-tempered blade, pointed and double-edged, which the dry ashes, piled high over it, had preserved bright and free from rust.

"By Thor, a right good weapon!" he laughed, as he swung it round, making it sing its song in the air. "A right good weapon, and how it makes the heart rejoice to feel the fingers clasp such a friend! Now

WULNOTH THE WANDERER

I have a long road to tread, and none can say what may befall in the journey or at its close, yet the way is clear thus far — I must seek Regner Lodbrok the Danish sea-king, and from him shall I glean tidings of Guthred the Prince." And with that Wulnoth, who called himself the Wanderer, turned from the place of desolation, carrying the great sword in his hand.

Now, this is how Wulnoth wrestled with one who called himself by his name, and this is how he started to seek for Regner Lodbrok, the mightiest of all the sea-kings of Denmark.

CHAPTER VII

Of the Coming of Wulnoth to the Danish Sea-kings

FOR many days did Wulnoth journey southward, for though Lethra was nigh the sea, and the journey over the Westarweg was the shortest road, yet he had no boat in which to sail, and, moreover, the time of the storms was coming, and he knew that to sail alone was to seek for death.

So by land he was forced to go, and the way was long and hard, and many were the times that he felt he would abide where he was, and give up this vain search.

And strange was it that whenever these thoughts came to him, then also came the strange being who was so like himself, and he would cry to Wulnoth to wrestle with him ere he went farther, and only when Wulnoth had wrestled and conquered was he able to go on again.

Many were the adventures which he met with, and many the perils he encountered, yet, still, in spite of all, he went his way over the long, long leagues

towards the southern sea, where he must perforce take ship of some kind if he wished to reach the sea-king's land on the other side of the wild Baltic, whereon the storm-king makes his dwelling-place and rides in his flying palace of lightning and tempest.

He made himself a light spear of hard wood, and with this he hunted the wild goats and the forest swine, and took their flesh for his food, and on this and on the wild berries did he live, and for his drink he had the runnels of clear water and nothing else.

By day he journeyed and by night he slept in the hollow trees or in caves, living like a wild man and a berserker, and, moreover, looking like one also, since his face was all grown with a wild beard and his hair hung in tangled masses to his shoulders.

In those dark nights, when the storms raged and the forest groaned beneath the buffets of the blast, evil voices called and made mock, urging him to give up so wild a journey, but in the day time the better voices always answered and encouraged him; and oft in his dreams Edgiva the Beautiful would stand beside him and smile, and beckon him on, whispering to him in tones like the sweet music of the scald's harp —

"Be brave, Wulnoth! Be patient, Wulnoth, for fame, and honor, and love, and that which is better than fame or honor or love await thee in the end."

And when Edgiva stood thus, it ever seemed that she ever held that little cross of wood, bound with grass and wreathed with thorn spray, which Wyborga the Wise had fashioned in the days long past.

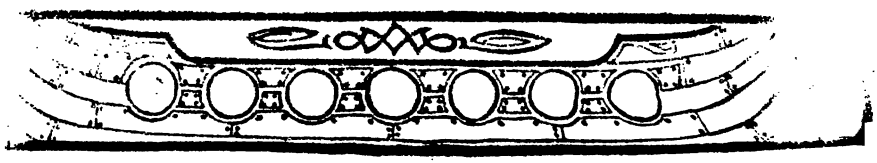
So through the forests and across the mountains and over dreary wastes did Wulnoth go, and of those whom he met his only question was whether he was journeying towards the sea-king's land.

"Thou art going aright," he was answered each time he asked that question. "Thou wilt come to the sea, and there thou must take ship. But beware what thou doest in the sea-king's land, for fierce and cruel are the vikings, and their swords sing loudly."

Once, deep in a wild forest, he met a band of masterless men, who sprang up and seized their weapons and bade him stand, and then demanded his name and business.

"I am nameless, and called the Wanderer," he said fearlessly. "As for my business, that is my own alone, yet this I say, I seek the sea-kings of Denmark."

"Then thou seekest a right jolly company," laughed the robber chief. "Bold and daring are they, and there are no warriors to beat them. Yet I prefer to keep my feet on the dry land and to dwell with my jolly company here in the depths of the forest. Now, Wanderer, thou art a goodly man, and that great sword of thine looks a goodly sword. How sayest thou? Abide with us and be content, and thou shalt have fun and plunder enough and to spare, and hardly a day shall pass but thy sword shall sing its merry song while the red flames burst from the roof. The life of the masterless man may not be so full of adventure, but 't is also less full of peril. Not that I fear peril from the weapons of a stout foeman, but, by Odin, I care little for the thought of



being sucked down into the depths of the sea for kraken and other monsters to make a meal of me. Stay with us, thou Wanderer, and be of our company."

But to that Wulnoth made reply that this might not be since he had a task to do, and might not turn from it; and the robber asked him what his task might be.

"I want to seek out the mightiest king and the strongest lord," explained Wulnoth. And the robber laughed.

"Methinks thou hast a hard task before thee, Wanderer," he said. "For yonder in the Danish land, and beyond that in the land of the Saxons, which methinks thou must have come from, and beyond that again in the land of the Franks, thou wilt find many who cry that they are the mightiest and bravest; and yet, by the hammer of the great Thor, they are mighty only because they have the swords and axes and spears of fools who are content to shed their blood that their lords may snatch the gain. Not so do we, where all share alike."

"Methinks, though, that old Lodbrok is truly a mighty man, if the stories that I have heard of him are true," said Wulnoth. And the robber nodded.

"Ay, a mighty man. I know few more so."

"But death is mightier than Lodbrok the dragon-slayer," cried another man. And the captain answered —

"True. To the old viking, Death, all heads must bow at last, for Death is strongest and last of all."

"Death is strongest of all!" mused Wulnoth.

"Then did Wyborga mean that if I would find Guthred and win Edgiva I must be ready to die? If that is so, then I need not travel far, for death may be met with everywhere."

"I warn thee of one thing, Wanderer," said one of the robbers. "If thou goest to Lodbrok, the son of Sigurd, beware of his two sons, for they are merciless as the edge of the sword, and fiercer than the flames in war time. By my beard, I had rather keep beyond their reach — the hug of the bear is gentle compared with the hand grasp of Hungwar or Hubba his brother."

"Though Hungwar and Hubba be terrible as the storm god and fiercer than the fire, yet I go on," said Wulnoth stoutly. "My way must be straight as the birds' road, nor may anything turn me aside."

"Then go on and prosper, thou Wanderer of the stout heart," the masterless men answered, "but we abide in the woods and live our merry life."

So Wulnoth, after that he had eaten and rested and warmed himself at the fire around which the robbers sat, their faces glowing red in the flame light, passed on his way, his sword in hand, ready for any dangers that might meet him on the road.

And so he journeyed day by day until he came to a town, and there the people stared at him and asked —

"Who is this stranger with the big sword, who looks wild as a berserker?"

And the lord of the place sent for him, and demanded his business; and when he knew that Wulnoth sought the sea-kings out, he said sternly —

"There be not ropes enough nor trees enough whereon to hang the pirates of Juteland and Denmark, who are the scourge of all honest peoples, and goest thou to join them, stranger? Now methinks that I ought to hang thee rather than let thee go on."

"There may be two sides to that, jarl," answered Wulnoth calmly. "Not while I hold my sword will any one lightly talk of hanging me. Yet this I say, jarl — there may be other reasons why one seeks the sea-kings out. The flames may have burst from the roof and the sword may have sung its song, and there may be a debt to pay, lord jarl; therefore let me go my way."

"And go thou shalt if that is in thy mind," answered the jarl, "though in truth thou must be a bold man if thou art going alone to such a task."

"One may ofttimes accomplish that wherein a score would fail, jarl," was the reply; "therefore again I say let me go in peace, and perchance thou mayst hear a tale one of these days, and in that tale I, the Wanderer, may perchance play a part."

Then the jarl sent him on his way, and at length Wulnoth reached the coast, after many long and weary days of trial; and there before him, dark and vast, the stormy Baltic heaved, and across that dark water the grim rock-bound shores of Denmark lay.

Now on the rocky shore a village was built, and thither went Wulnoth to ask if he could get ship to Denmark, but not one of those who dwelt there would listen to his words.

"Quite close enough are we to our neighbors," they

said. "We have no desire to come nearer if it may be helped, whilst as for the sea, the storms will be sweeping it in a few days now, and we have no wish to become food for the kraken."

"Now," thought Wulnoth to himself, "I am as far off as ever, for this sea I must cross, and yet I cannot get ship to bear me."

And down to the foot of the dark cliffs he went, gazing across the water, and pondering upon how he might cross it; and while he stood there, yet once again there came he who had called himself Wulnoth, and he stood and mocked at him and cried —

"So, Wanderer, thou hast got thus far, and now thou art stopped. Now thou shalt wrestle with me yet once again, and I will carry thee back to the land from which thou hast journeyed and there help thee to make a name for thyself."

Then did Wulnoth utter a cry of anger, and he seized this man whom he before had overthrown, and he said —

"Now am I weary of thy gibing and thy worry, thou who callest thyself by my name, and whom I have already overthrown more than once. Now we will indeed make an end, and if there is no other way, then will I swim this water, but thou shalt swim it with me."

And once again they struggled there on the weed-strewn shore, and this time Wulnoth had easy mastery — for each time they had fought he had grown the stronger and the other had become weaker, and now he soon vanquished him, and he cried —

"Now thou and I will swim together, and if we perish then it is done with."

But to this the other answered, crying in terror —

"Not yet, Wanderer! Not yet! I will show thee a better way."

"And what is that way?" asked Wulnoth. "Speak quickly, for I have no mind to tarry."

Then the other pointed out a spot to Wulnoth, and there two great bears came slyly down to make war against a great monster of the deep — one shaped like a seal but ever so much larger — larger than the largest ox, with huge tusks like unto the horns of a wild bull set in its upper jaw and protruding downwards, and with moustache like a viking lord's on its lip.

"The bears will attack the sea-cow," said the strange man. "Now watch, and when the battle is fierce, take thy sword and slay the bears, and then ask the sea-cow to aid thee."

So Wulnoth watched, full of wonder, and the two bears came down and flung themselves upon the sea-cow who had been sleeping there on the shore, and the mighty animal made a valiant fight and smote hard with its tusks, and the whole air trembled with the bellowings and roarings of the strife. But the bears got one on either side, and Wulnoth saw that the fight was going against the sea-cow and that it would be slain. So he drew his sword and he rushed at the bears, and smote strong strokes, so that one was slain and the other fled, leaving the track of its blood to tell of Wulnoth's strong hand.

Then the sea-cow turned and spoke in deep hoarse tones, and Wulnoth wondered that he could understand its speech, not knowing that Wyborga the Wise had put this into his mind. And the sea-cow said —

"Greeting to thee, O Wanderer, and thanks for the help of thy hand and thy sword, for without that help methinks the bears would have made an end of me. Now, therefore, tell me what is in thine heart, and if it may be I will do it."

So Wulnoth made known his desire to cross the water, and the sea-cow laughed at that.

"It is a light task for me that you have set, Wanderer," it said. "Nor will it take long to fulfil. Now get thee on to my back and hold thee still, and I will do thy behest and carry thee to Denmark."

Then Wulnoth, greatly marvelling, obeyed, and clambered upon the monster's broad back. And the sea-cow beat the waves with her mighty flippers and cleaved her way through the sea, faster than the fastest ship could sail, until the shores of the North faded and the shores of the South grew clear, and then, beating against the wind and making for the land, they saw a long ship with shields along the sides and the raven banner overhead, and Wulnoth knew that it was a vessel of the sea-kings, and he hailed it across the waves.

Now in the ship the rowers sat tugging at the oars and the leaders gathered on the prow and looked across the water, laughing and jesting. A big, fierce, warlike set they were, grizzled in battle and marked with many marks of the war game; and as they talked and

laughed, suddenly over the waves rang the sound of a voice, and they stared in fear to see a great man, shaggy as a berserker, with long yellow hair and blue eyes, come speeding towards them upon the back of a sea monster.

"By Thor!" cried one. "'T is surely some warlock come to do us harm. Let us flee."

But another, who was leader of the pirates, answered with a fierce oath and said —

"Warlock or not, I flee not from anything. If the hour of the death-song comes, it comes, therefore round with the ship and let us go to meet this being, who thus calls to us from out the swan bath."

So round came the ship, and near Wulnoth approached, and he cried aloud —

"Greeting to you, viking lords; I come to meet you."

"Greeting to thee, stranger," they answered. "And who art thou who sailest the swan bath in so strange a ship, and what dost thou want with us?"

"I am the Wanderer," answered Wulnoth. "So am I called, for I have wandered far, seeking that which I seek, and I have come to you because ye perchance may know of that which I want."

"By Thor, this is passing strange," muttered the viking lord, whilst the rowers sat open-mouthed and wide-eyed. "'T is strange, and none who have not seen this will believe it." Then he said aloud —

"Tell me, Wanderer, what is it that thou dost seek so straitly?"

"The strongest and mightiest of lords," answered Wulnoth, "and so I have heard Regner Lodbrok called, and hither have I come seeking for him."

"And by the beard of Beorn, thou hast sought a right worthy lord," the viking replied. "For there is none more mighty than old Regner, Sigurd's son. But he is not in his hall now. Four moons ago he sailed to East Anglia and we await his message to join him. But his sons are in the hall, and Hungwar and Hubba are names known to men. Also there is the renowned Guthrun there, awaiting tidings from Regner. To these chiefs of fame thou canst make thy story known if thou desirest. But how comes it that thou ridest the waves in so strange a fashion?"

"Because I could get no man to let me have ship, all fearing to come too nigh your coasts."

"Ay," laughed the vikings, "they know our greetings are somewhat rough. But what of thy steed, Wanderer? Thou hast not told that!"

"The steed I found and rendered some service to, and for my payment he brought me over, as you see. Now shall I come into your ship, or shall I race you across?"

"A race, a race!" cried the vikings, and they bent to their oars, and they stretched the sail, and flew before the wind. But swift though they went, swifter still sped the sea-cow, and when they reached the land, there stood Wulnoth to greet them, and the sea-cow had gone back to the depths.

"Thou hast won the race, Wanderer," they said,

" and never did man win in stranger fashion. Yet never mind that now. Come thou with us, and we will lead thee to our lords. And look that thou answer firmly and without fear, and in few words, for Hungwar loveth not long speech nor to be crossed, and the rod and the sword are his only words to any whom he thinks nithing."

" I am well content," answered Wulnoth. " Lead the way." And so to the sea-king's hall he was conducted.

Now, this is how Wulnoth crossed the swans' bath, and how he met the vikings, and was led to the presence of the Danish sea-kings.

CHAPTER VIII

Of what befell Wulnoth in the Halls of the Danes

IN the great hall of Regner Lodbrok sat his two sons who ruled in his absence, together with many a great holda of Juteland and Denmark and other vikings from the North who had gathered with them. The room was long and low, and its oaken beams were black with age and smoke. Its walls were covered with skins and horns and trophies of the chase, and laden with shields and swords and other warlike gear.

Great torches, fixed in iron sconces, cast a smoky glare on the scene, and on the mighty hearth a huge fire of logs burnt, and the blue smoke curled upwards to escape through a hole in the roof.

The upper end of the room was slightly raised, and there, in carved chairs at a table which ran crosswise the width of the hall, the nobles sat quaffing the brown ale from their deep drinking horns.

There, side by side, Hungwar and Hubba sat, older and fiercer now than when Wulnoth had seen them lead the attack at Lethra, and they had been bad enough then.

Hungwar, the elder of the brothers, was shaggy as the bear, but Hubba was smooth of face save for his heavy moustache, and on Hungwar's cheek was a scar as of a sword cut.

And there also sat Bacseg, King of the North Danes, and Halfdane the Fierce, and Sidroc the Cruel, and Osbern, and Frena, and Harold, all viking lords, holdas of high birth and warriors of fame, and each was clad in his war gear, and each had his weapons ready to hand; for words were few and blows quick in those days, and even the feasting might become the warring before men could understand the cause of the quarrel.

Set crosswise to the table, and running down the length of the room like the longer line of the letter T, was another table, and here the soldiers and the lesser leaders sat at their feasting, and the place rang with shouts of laughter and wild jest, and ever and anon with the music of the harp and the song of the scald, singing the praises of one or other of the captains; and into this company was Wulnoth led by the captain of those whom he had met.

"How now, Wahrmund!" cried Hungwar as he caught sight of the captain. "So thou hast come back, thou old wolf; and what of thy voyaging, eh?"

"The voyage was quick and the task short,

Hungwar," came the answer. "And the men of Osric are scattered and their homes given to the flame!"

"Good!" cried the leaders as they heard. "Osric will not defy our might again." And then Hungwar went on, staring at Wulnoth —

"But what flaxen-haired giant of the South have you here, Wahrmund? Is this a captive from the foe? That cannot be, seeing that he is unbound and has his sword by his side. Who is this giant, and what does he here?"

"By Thor, he is a goodly man to look upon," cried one noble, bending forward and staring at Wulnoth. "I love a man when I see one, and yonder one is."

Then he raised his horn and cried to Wulnoth —

"Waes heal, stranger of the blue eyes and yellow hair," and to him Wulnoth answered —

"Drinc heal, lord."

"Now, by Odin and his twelve companions," growled Hubba, "one would think that we have no men in Denmark, noble Guthrun, that thou must make so much of this berserker."

This Guthrun was a brawny, broad-shouldered giant himself, and his hair was plaited in two long plaits which fell on either side his face, and on his arms he had massy bracelets of gold. He seemed a good-humored man, for he roared with laughter at Hubba's words and made answer —

"Not so, Hubba. We be men enough, and therefore we should love all men, be they friend or foe — and, by my word, I love a good foeman. As for being

berserker, this stranger is none the worse for that in my eyes so that he be a dealer of lusty blows."

"How came ye by this man, Wahrmund?" asked Hungwar, stopping what might have led to a quarrel. And all listened while the viking told his tale.

And when he was done Hungwar turned to Wulnoth, who had stood there erect and calm, and all eyes were bent upon him.

"This is a strange tale that we hear, stranger," he said. "So thou comest to us through the swans' bath, riding a sea-monster like a horse. By my faith, most of thy people — for surely thou art Saxon by thy eyes and hair — most of thy people, I say, rather shun us. Now tell us thy tale — for surely thou hast fled from some fate that thou didst deserve. Thou art nameless and landless, I 'll warrant me."

"Or else I should not come to those who take land with their sword," answered Wulnoth, and at this the vikings laughed, and said that surely this was a merry fellow. But Hungwar frowned, and said sternly —

"Thou hast a sharp tongue, stranger, but we love sharp swords. Thou hast a quick word, but we love quick deeds."

"Blow and deed will be quick enough when the time comes," Wulnoth made answer, and he looked into Hungwar's face and noted the scar that his sword had made in the past. "For myself, I am the Wanderer, for I have wandered far in my search. For my place, I come from the North, whither I was taken in my childhood after that the sword of the Dane had harried

our land. As thou sayest, I am landless and nameless, and, moreover, a thrall — though I have rent the thrall collar from my neck, having somewhat outgrown its size, and he who placed it there being dead. Yet that makes little difference to thee, seeing that it is said that thou lovest those who strike strong blows better than those who have noble blood."

"Be it as it may. Thou hast come to serve under me, then?" cried the Dane.

But to this Wulnoth said, "Nay. I am seeking the bravest, the mightiest, and the noblest in the world." And at that Hungwar frowned and smote the table.

"Thou dog!" he cried. "Am I not he?" And at that Wulnoth laughed.

"Why, Hungwar, did I say ay to that, I might have all the holdas here flying at me or falling upon thee. Nay, I seek one whose name is greater than even thine — I seek Regner Lodbrok, thy father." And at that all there cried that it was well, and that Regner Lodbrok was the champion of champions.

"So thou seekest to serve my father," sneered Hungwar. "Now, by my beard, he who seeks such honor must of the honor be worthy. If thou wouldst serve none but the bravest and mightiest, thou thyself must be brave and mighty."

"Wouldst that I match myself against thee, Hungwar?" asked Wulnoth calmly. And at that the holdas laughed, for they liked to see Hungwar baited; but Hungwar frowned darkly.

"Thou art over bold, Wanderer," he said. "The bloodhound runs not with the wolf."

"But the wolf sometimes pulls down the bloodhound, Hungwar," was the ready answer. "But enough of such talk. Thou desirest to see my strength. So be it. How shall we test it?"

Then Hungwar took up a block of wood and gave it to Wulnoth, saying —

"Let us see what thy sword is worth, Wanderer. Split me that block at one blow." And at that Wulnoth laughed mockingly.

"Too easy a task, Hungwar," he answered. "Far too easy. Let me see thee rend it asunder with thy naked hands."

"Thou art drunk, fool!" roared the Dane. "No man living may do that."

"We will see," answered Wulnoth, and placing the block carefully, he bent one knee upon it and gripped it with both hands, while all there rose to their feet to watch him. Then slowly and steadily he pulled, and the muscles of his arms and back stood out like ropes, and he thought within himself that his work with Osth was bearing fruit now. And as he pulled there was a sharp sound of rending wood, and the block fell apart in twain, while all there shouted till the roof rang at this great deed.

"Now, by my beard!" cried King Bacseg, "but we have a mighty man here. What sayest thou, Hubba?"

"Strong arms and strong wits go not always

together. The bear is strong, but the fox beats him in cunning."

"Now, that may be," shouted Guthrun, "but we love strong arms rather than quick brains. Still, methinks the Wanderer is not slow of wit either — and he brags not as some do," he added to himself.

"What other task wilt thou set me, Hungwar, son of Regner?" asked Wulnoth. "Since I seek thy father's service, I am willing to prove that I am worthy of it." And Hungwar frowned, for, he knew not why, he felt hate for this stranger, and would gladly have put him to shame.

"Perchance the block was cracked," he said, "and I noticed it not." And Wulnoth smiled and answered —

"Perchance it was."

Then he picked up an iron mace, with the handle an inch thick, and he held it up.

"Some of you strike hard blows," he said. "Which, then, will sever this with a clean cut with one blow of the sword?"

"I will try," cried Guthrun, for he, like all the vikings, loved trial of strength.

So he took the mace and set it on the riven block, and with bared arms he lifted his sword high in the air and smote with all his force, and the sword bit deep into the iron, but severed it not.

Then tried Osbern, and after him tried Halfdane, and after him the Norse Jarl Eric, and after him Biorn Ironsides the Mighty, and not one of them could cut quite through the bar.

Then Wulnoth took his great sword, and he said, "Give me another bar, for this one is much cut now, and let it be stouter and stronger."

"This braggart shall not humble us," thought Hungwar, and he sent for his own mace, and the handle was nigh two inches thick.

"Canst cut that, boaster?" he said; and Guthrun cried out that it was not fair since 't was twice as thick as the other.

But Wulnoth swung high his sword, and the keen blade sang in the air like the scream of the gull as it flies before the storm. And lo, the iron was sheered in twain, clean cut, and the block beneath it split in two beneath the blow.

"Skoal to the Wanderer!" cried the vikings. "Worthy is he to be of our number!" But Wulnoth said —

"Wilt set me another task, O Hungwar?"

"By Thor, I will set thee a task!" cried Hubba fiercely. "All this is but child's play and has no danger in it. Come hither, Wiglaf."

Then uprose a mighty man, with bare arms and hairy, and he laughed grimly.

"What is thy pleasure, Hubba?" he asked. And Hubba said to Wulnoth —

"See here, Wanderer. This man is our mightiest boxer, and no man can stand a blow from his fist. Wilt thou exchange a blow with him?"

"That will I," answered Wulnoth. "Strike thou, Wiglaf."

"Not so," shouted Guthrun. "That were a poor test, for if Wiglaf strikes first, how shall Wanderer have strength to strike back? Let them fight one round if they will. By my father's name, 't will be a splendid sight to see."

"So be it," laughed Wulnoth. "I care not," and he and Wiglaf the Boxer faced each other.

"'T is a cruel man, Wanderer," whispered Wahrmund in Wulnoth's ear, "and he fights not over fair. Mind thyself, for he will kill thee if he can."

"If he can," answered Wulnoth; and then the fighters faced each other, and the vikings forgot their drinking horns and watched breathless.

For a little the pair feinted, and then Wiglaf rushed forward and smote a mighty blow like to have felled an ox. But Wulnoth caught it and turned it aside, and then he smote and Wiglaf could not avoid the blow, and though he caught it on his arm, there was a sound like as of a breaking stick, and the boxer's arm fell helpless, for the bone was broken.

Now all the vikings started to their feet and roared that Wulnoth was worthy to be of the best of them; and Hubba and Hungwar frowned, for they liked not men who could do more than they dared.

Then did Wulnoth rise, and he spoke and said —

"All the tasks that you have set me I have accomplished, O holdas. Now I will take a task upon my own shoulders, and if any of you dare try it, then do it first. See you yon beast?" and he pointed to the

open beyond the door, where, in a fenced field, a great shaggy bull bellowed and stamped.

"Well, what of him, Wanderer?" cried Guthrun eagerly. "What new wonder canst thou show us? Only be careful of that brute, for he has killed five men already."

"Which of you will go and bring yon bull to his knees with hand, and hand alone?" Wulnoth asked. And Hungwar cried thickly —

"Thou fool, there is no man on earth can do it."

"That will we see," laughed Wulnoth lightly, and setting his sword aside, he leaped the rails and entered the bull's field, while all there crowded out to watch him, thinking that the stranger would of a surety be slain now.

And the bull glared at Wulnoth with bloodshot eyes, and lowered its massive head, pawing the ground and roaring deeply. Then, like a bolt, it charged, and the onlookers gasped, for they thought that now the daring man must perish. But quick as the bull moved, quicker still was Wulnoth, and he sprang aside and let the monster pass.

Then round wheeled the animal, but Wulnoth was ready at its side, and he gripped the wide-spreading horns and stood, and the bull stood pushing against him, both motionless, man and animal.

"Now, by Odin!" shouted Hungwar, "the man is in a poor case, for he cannot let go."

"And, by Odin!" shouted Guthrun, "he does not

desire to let go. Look, look! who ever saw the like of this?"

For now Wulnoth put out his strength and did as he had been taught of old by Osth. First he pushed the bull backwards, and then he gripped tighter and swung mightily, and the bull was jerked off its feet; and then he twisted sharply, putting out every bit of his might, and the great beast cried in its pain and fell upon its knees, and all the fierceness was gone out of it.

Then did the vikings leap up and run to Wulnoth and lift him, and carry him round on their shoulders, crying "Skoal" to him. But Hubba frowned darkly, and bent towards his brother and whispered —

"I like not this fellow who has come to put us to shame with his strength. We must look to this, brother."

And to that Hungwar nodded, and answered back, "Even so. But the dagger may turn greater strength than this man's into weakness."

So the brothers spoke, and only Guthrun noticed and heard the words they said.

Now, this is how Wulnoth showed his strength before the Danish holdas, and this is how Guthrun knew that the sons of Regner planned evil towards the Wanderer.

CHAPTER IX

How the Sea-kings sailed for East Anglia

O Wulnoth tarried in the Danish camp, and the vikings greeted him as one of themselves, but old Wahrmund took him aside and whispered more than once that he should beware of Wiglaf the Boxer as soon as his arm was well.

"Wiglaf forgives no injury," he said, "and the greatest injury which thou canst do to him is to beat him fairly. Therefore beware of Wiglaf, O Wanderer."

"Surely a brave man should feel no bitterness against him who overthrows him in fair fight!" answered Wulnoth. But to that Wahrmund only said again —

"Beware of Wiglaf when he is recovered."

And that was not the only warning that was received by Wulnoth, for Guthrun the viking lord met

him, having sought such a meeting, and he said to him grimly —

"Wanderer, I love a man who plays the man's game well and truly, but some there be who love thee not; and if thou takest my advice, thou wilt not tarry with the sons of Regner too long. Yet if thou hast desire for service, my ships have places for such warriors as thou art." And with that he went his way.

"Now," thought Wulnoth to himself, "truly this is a hard case for me. If I tarry here, I am like to come to harm; and if I tarry not, how shall I either meet with this champion Regner Lodbrok, or learn tidings of Prince Guthred my friend? Truly the Lord Guthrun seems more noble than these sons of Regner, and yet with them I must abide, methinks."

So for a week Wulnoth stayed there, and none sought to do him harm, and even Hungwar spoke fairly to him, having somewhat conquered his anger at Wiglaf's defeat.

But it was with Wahrmund that Wulnoth spoke most, for a friendship had grown between them, and very cautiously did Wulnoth question the viking, not letting him know the cause, and ask him if he remembered aught of the conquest of Lethra.

"That do I," answered the warrior, laughing deeply, "seeing that I fought there from first to last. And that same King of Lethra was a hero, and fought a good fight. Methinks sometimes that 't is a pity there is so much sword-singing between brave men. 'T is our trade, yet sometimes I think that peace time

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is the best. Yea, I remember Lethra, and I mind me of the anger of Hungwar because a boy — who by the way was a Saxon thrall to Jarl Berwulf — smote the champion with a broken sword, and left its kiss upon his cheek, as thou seest until this day. 'T was my hand that cut the boy down, but by Thor, he was a proper lad, and I have been sorry for it since."

"But there was another boy there, comrade!" said Wulnoth eagerly. "A son of Hardacnute. What was his fate?"

The viking looked at him sharply and pondered a moment.

"Wanderer, thou knowest far too much about Lethra for thy health, if thy questioning come to the ears of the holdas," he said sternly. "Thus I counsel to question none save me, and if thy questions may be answered with honor, then I will answer them. Dost know thou mindest me of that Saxon boy, full grown now? It might be ill for thee didst thou remind some we know of in this same way."

"Wahrmund," said Wulnoth quietly, "thou art a brave man and true, and now I will place my life in thy hand, for of a truth I am that boy — Wulnoth the son of Cerdic. Yet know, Wahrmund, that Cerdic was no thrall to Berwulf, for Berwulf murdered the Saxon jarl Tholk, and Cerdic refused to serve the Dane. And when Berwulf had him whipped, then he smote him with his own axe and fled, and, by Thor, 't was the deed of a man to do that!"

"Perchance so," answered the other, and then Wulnoth went on with his story —

"Now, Wahrmund, in those days did the son of Hardacnute make friendship with the outlaw Saxon boy, and they swore to live as brothers; and on the day when the evil came to Lethra — this was prophesied by a wise woman — Guthred the Prince made me swear that I would seek for him and aid him if might be; and for this reason am I come to the camp, that of him I might learn tidings if he is still alive."

"I remember the boy," the Dane answered. "And surely 't was a hard thing that was done to him by Hungwar and Hubba, for they sold him as a slave, though he was a king's son; and I have heard that his master took him to the land of the Anglo Saxons, though in what part of that land he dwells, if he be still alive, is more than I can tell."

"I thank thee for thy words, Wahrmund," answered Wulnoth, "and I trust thee with my story."

"Thou mayst trust me with it, Wanderer," answered the Dane. "So long as thou art true while thou dost stay with us, that is all I ask. If thou go into battle with us, fight for us and not for our foes; and if thou dost ever desire to depart, depart without striking secret blow — "

"As to that, the rede that I follow directed me to seek this camp and serve Regner Lodbrok; and so I have no desire to fight for your foes or against you."

"Regner tarries long in Angleland," the Dane said gloomily. "I would that he were back to lead us

himself, for the camp is broken with so many holdas, and there is like to be mischief done ere long."

"Wahrmund," said Wulnoth, "canst thou tell me this? Dost thou know any people who worship not the gods of the North, but One who died on a cross?"

"Ay, that do I. 'T is the religion of most of the Anglo Saxons now. They have forgotten their old faith, and turned to this strange one. Yet it is a strange story, and one that touches the heart, Wanderer," he went on; "and it hath wondrous power with them, making them merciful to the foe and calm in face of torment and death. Some of our men have put their captives to sharp torture to make them renounce this God of theirs; but I have not known one succeed. They have killed their victims, but in dying the Christians — for so they call themselves — have sung songs of triumph. They are men indeed who can fight, and suffer, and die, and yet this creed is the creed of a nithing. 'T is beyond my poor wits, who know nothing of aught save the storm-sea and the sword-song."

"And this religion is in Angleland, and Guthred is in Angleland, and Regner Lodbrok is in Angleland also! 'T is strange. It points to my going there also"; and Wulnoth was silent, and mused on what he heard.

Then said Wahrmund, pointing out to the water: "What ship is this which comes speeding towards the land? Let us go down and see who these may be who come over the swan-bath thus."

So down to the shore they went, and the ship drew near; and it was but a small one, with a few rowers,

and no shields hung on its sides; and yet as Wahrmund looked he started and cried —

"Now here are evil tidings; for of a surety yonder man at the helm is Bern, and Bern was the man of Regner Lodbrok."

Then the boat reached the land, and the men laid aside their oars and came ashore, and stood with drooping heads, as those who carried heavy tidings; and the viking cried —

"Oh, thou who art Bern, man of Regner Lodbrok, why comest thou thus, as they that flee in battle? and where is thy master, our Holda?"

"With those who feast in Walhalla," answered the seaman. "Lead me to Hungwar, or to his noble brother, for I have heavy tidings to tell; and the soul of Regner Lodbrok calls aloud for vengeance, for the nithing deed and the shame deed that were done to him."

"Now, by Thor," cried Wahrmund, "he will not cry in vain; for, if aught of wrong hath been done to Regner the son of Sigurd, the vikings will have a song to sing and a fire to light"; and, with that, Wahrmund turned and guided the man to the vikings' hall; and Wulnoth followed to hear what had befallen Regner Lodbrok.

And in the hall the holdas feasted; only some looked weary, for their souls hungered for the man's game, and they tired of tarrying on land; and when Hungwar saw Wahrmund enter, he cried —

"Greeting, Wahrmund! Whom dost thou bring,

and why dost thou turn thy spear head down, as if evil had come to some?"

"Evil hath come, Hungwar," answered Wahrmund. "This man is Bern, who sailed with thy mighty father, and he hath ill news to tell to thee, O jarl." And then the chiefs looked up, and all voices were hushed; for they knew that the death-song had been sung for Regner Lodbrok, the old sea-king.

And then Hungwar said, while Hubba sat silent by his side —

"So the son of Sigurd is dead, and the death-song hath been sung. Then I will warrant that he died as a mighty hero, and that his sword sang merrily ere he fell, and the Valkyrs were busy. Is it not so, silent one? Speak and tell thy tale, lest I open thy lips with a touch of fire."

"I will tell my tale, Hungwar son of Regner," the man answered. "But it is a heavy one, and the telling of it is hard. No hero death did Regner die, but such a death as a nithing would have deserved; and yet he died a hero, and sang his death-song. By treachery and falsehood was he conquered, O Hungwar, and for vengeance does he cry to thee and to all thy people."

"Tell thy story, man," answered Hungwar grimly, "and be sure that the son of Sigurd shall not cry in vain. Truly, our swords are weary of idleness and our ships yearn for the waves. Tell thy story, and tell it true, all of it, neither more nor less."

"I obey thee," answered the man; and this is the story that he told. Eastward to Angleland had Regner

Lodbrok sailed, with only a few men, chiefs of fame, for they had not meant to tarry in the land, but to see for themselves if it was a good land and fair, and worth the attacking. And on the eastern coast a great storm had come, and driven them on shore, so that the ship was wrecked and only a few escaped death. They were in the land of the East Angles, whereover one Edmund is king; and he at first received Regner and his companions with friendship, and gave them gifts.

Yet some of the people murmured because of the Danes being there; and Regner heard how in the north dwelt one Ella King of Northumbria, who was himself of Danish blood; and thither to greet him Regner went. But Ella liked not the coming of the stranger; for the Danes, who had settled in the north and taken possession of the land, desired that no more of their numbers should come to share the prize with them. So this Ella, though he received Regner with soft speech, yet purposed to do him harm, and plotted to take his life; yet in what manner to do so he did not know.

Now the King had built him a high tower, called Ella's Tower, and beneath this tower was a dungeon dark and drear; and into this dungeon did King Ella cause a number of deadly vipers to be let loose — for he had a mind to shame Regner Lodbrok as well as slay him, because that this Regner boasted, and made much of his having slain the dragon and rescued Thora the Fair from its power.

So when Regner and his friends sat at feasting, the soldiers of the King of Northumbria came upon them

and put them to the sword; but Regner they took and bound, and cast into the vipers' tower, bidding him, since he had slain the dragon, slay also the snakes, which were less than the dragon. And the vipers bit the old sea-king deep and sore, so that he knew that his death was nigh, and none were there to sing his death-song.

And alone in the dungeon, with the biting vipers, Regner Lodbrok sang his own death-song; and the name thereof is Krakamal; and that song is known to this day amongst the sagas of the Northland; and that song he sang, while the darkness gathered, and the Valkyrs carried his spirit to Walhalla.[1]

Such was the tale that the messenger told in the hall of the sea-kings; and when the story was finished there was silence for a short space, and then uprose Hungwar, and Hubba rose and stood by his side, and Hungwar spoke and said —

"Oh, holdas of Denmark, ye have heard this story, and it is a shame tale; and the spirit of the son of

[1] This legend of the death of Regner Lodbrok is the one most common in his histories. But there is another, and more probable, story, which tells how he, having been received by Edmund, afterwards known as the martyr king of East Anglia, was murdered by the King's huntsman, and hidden in a wood. The body was found by Regner's dog, who scraped the leaves away and revealed the crime. For this the huntsman was placed in a boat which was unseaworthy and cast adrift; and the boat, surviving the tempests, drifted to Denmark, where the guilty man, to save himself, put the crime at Edmund's door. As it was East Anglia which was first invaded by Hungwar and Hubba, and not Northumbria, this story seems the more probable; and especially so in view of the fact that Hungwar and Hubba put their royal captive Edmund to death in the most barbarous fashion afterwards.

Sigurd calls to my brother and to me, and bids us take vengeance on his foes. Now, those who list come, and those who will tarry, tarry; but, as for Hubba and me, we will cross the Westarweg and carry fire and sword into Angleland; and from south to north will we harry it. Now, viking lords, and sea-kings, who comes with us?"

Then did all there start to their feet, and then did their great swords flash out, as they cried Skoal to the memory of Regner Lodbrok; and with one mighty voice they answered and cried —

"We will come, sons of Regner. We will man our ships and come; and from south to north we will follow the footsteps of Regner Lodbrok, and leave a pathway of ashes and death; and then will we take this land for our own. But as for Ella, King of Northumbria, better for him that he had never lived, than that he fall into our hands. For each sting that the son of Sigurd received, he shall receive a thousand pains."

Then all was bustle and hurry in the realm; and each lord went his way to summon his own men, and to make ready his long ships; so that never before in all the land was so vast a fleet prepared, nor so great an army gathered, and in no history is there a full list of names of all the sea-kings who sailed to Angleland at that time.

There were Frena, and Guthrun, and Sidric the elder, and Sidric the younger, and Hungwar and Hubba, all jarls of fame. And there were Kings Godron and Halfdane, and Bacseg, and Hamond, and Oskettle — five

kings of might; and Biorn Ironsides and many champions, so that one knows not all their names. And with them came many young warriors, the sons of holdas, seeking to make a name, and many old vikings who had spent their lives on the sea, and whose play was the man's game; and landless men, and nameless men, who had joined the vikings to seek their fortunes in land afar.

Never was such a scene; never did so many long ships lie like black snakes on the water; never did so many shields gleam like suns, as the light played upon them.

And in Hungwar's own ship they placed the great banner of Regner Lodbrok, which his daughters had woven and made in the space of one noontide; and thereon was the Raven of Odin, worked in cunning work; and it stretched its wings and stood erect, and all men shouted that the omen was good, and that victory would be theirs.

For this banner was supposed to be of wondrous might; and if defeat was to come then the raven's wings drooped and its head hung; but if victory was to be their portion, then its wings were raised, and it stood defiant.

Such was the story; though whether any man ever saw the bird change cannot be told. Yet afterwards, as you shall presently hear, the men of Wessex took that banner and slew Hubba, and still the raven's wings were spread and its head raised; so perchance the power of the magic spell had fled from its folds.

And then all the war-horns blared, and all the sails were hoisted, and out over the dark, rolling sea the rovers sailed; so that the ships were as many as the forest leaves on the stream when the wind blows among the trees.

And some sailed for Northumbria and some went south to Wessex, and some shaped their course to land in Mercia; but Hungwar and Hubba and those who followed with him sailed on towards East Anglia, where their father, Regner Lodbrok, had landed at the first; and over the ship the great raven banner streamed, and around the seamews circled and screamed; and the wind blew the salt foam into their faces. Yet on and on they went, until, far ahead, they saw the land lying like a cloud upon the horizon; and Wahrmund pointed towards it, and said to Wulnoth, who stood beside him —

"Yonder, Wanderer, is the land to which you desire to go. Yonder is the land of the Christians; and it is a rich land and fat, where much spoil may be gathered; and the people are soft and easy to conquer. Skoal to the Angleland, and Skoal to the landing; for heroic deeds will be done, and the man's game played long, and the sword sing a merry song, ere we put to sea again, and turn our faces to Denmark."

Then nearer and nearer the ships drew; and at last they dropped the sails and the vikings swarmed to the ships' sides, and there, ahead, they saw the sands, golden yellow; and the warriors of the land drawn up to drive them off.

"Now," laughed Wahrmund, "why do not these fools have good ships and come and meet us; so that we fought on sea and kept the fire from their land? These fools will never conquer us until they learn to fight in ships, as we do."

So said Wahrmund; but little did he think that even then there was in the land of the West Saxons a young man, one whose face was pale and pain marked, who pondered the same thing, and who afterwards caused such long ships to be built, and not only beat the Danes at their own game, but laid the foundations of that navy, by which, in after years, this Britain of ours has kept her proud boast and ruled the waves.

Now, this is how evil tidings came to Hungwar and Hubba, and this is how Wulnoth sailed with the sea-kings to the land of the East Angles.

CHAPTER X

Of the Slaying of Edmund, the King of the East Saxons

HEN the war-horns sounded their harsh defiance, and the vikings gave a great shout of glee, and threw themselves into the shallow water, and rushed to meet the Saxons, who also ran to drive them back.

And the battle was fierce, and great deeds were done; and from least to greatest every man was a hero. Yet the fight was with the Danes; and when the evening came the conquered Saxons broke and fled, and the sons of Regner encamped with their men on the field of slaughter not far from the coast.

And what happened in East Anglia happened elsewhere also; for the people of Angleland were divided amongst themselves, and one king warred with another, and each was jealous of his neighbor; so that they were like a bundle of sticks when the binding is broken, and each fell away from the rest. But the Danes came

in mighty hosts, and if one host was beaten then two came in its place; and all through the land they carried fire and sword and death.

For these Danes were cruel and terrible, and knew nothing of mercy; and neither youth, nor age, nor weakness appealed to them. The young and the old they slew, and the fair maiden, and the old wife; and they took the tender babes and beat out their brains, or cast them from one to the other upon their spears. Death, and death alone, marked out the pathway which they had trod.

Nor was this done in Angleland alone, but in every country where the White Christ was worshipped. For these Danes were pagans, and they looked upon those who had forgotten the old gods of the North as nithings fit only for death, and despised them for the Lord they worshipped, and for the priests they obeyed; and they had sworn that they would sweep over the whole world, and wherever the worship of the Christ was found, there they would stamp it out, and make all men bow to Odin and swear by Thor — the gods of the North.

And near to doing this they were in Angleland and, indeed, they would have done it but for one man, who was strong enough and patient enough to resist them; and of that man Gyso the Gleeman speaks in his song of Wulnoth.

Twenty thousand chosen warriors were in the camp of the sons of Regner that night, and deep they drank and well they feasted; yet the sentinels kept ward, and each man slept with his weapons by his side.

And Wahrmund and Wulnoth lay side by side by the fire, and talked of the deeds that had been done that day; and from the distance, through the night air, and above the sound of the sea, there came the ringing of a deep-voiced bell and, faint and sweet, the singing of a solemn song; and Wulnoth asked his companion what these strange sounds might mean.

"'T is the calling of the Christians to prayer," the Dane said carelessly. "And the song you hear is that which they sing to their God, that He may give them the victory on the morrow. By Thor, I had rather trust to a good sword and to a strong arm than to any god that rides the storm wind."

"Yet these men fought well to-day, comrade," Wulnoth answered; "though they were few in numbers, compared to our host."

"Ay, they fought well," replied Wahrmund. "But now let us sleep, for there will be work to do when the day dawns. The air is shrewd to-night."

"Take my cloak," answered Wulnoth. "For I have no mind for sleep, and will watch by the fire."

"More fool you," replied the other; yet he took the cloak and wrapped himself up and was soon asleep, while Wulnoth sat listening to the distant song, and wondering where Guthred could be and what could have become of Edgiva the Beautiful.

And then he arose and went to the edge of the wood and listened again; and he thought that surely Wyborga the Wise had been wrong, for how could

this Lord, Whom the Saxons worshipped, be strong, when He let His people be put to the sword?

And while he mused thus, sleep began to steal upon his eyes, until it seemed to him that a voice spoke, and it was the voice of Edgiva crying to him to awake; and he opened his eyes and saw a man's form bending over his comrade Wahrmund, and holding a knife high in the air.

"Wahrmund, awake!" he cried, in warning, and the man started up. But then like a flash Wulnoth cast his spear and smote the midnight wanderer fair in the chest, and he fell back dead.

And Wahrmund started to his feet, and others of the soldiers, and looked to see who this might be; and lo, it was Wiglaf the Boxer, the man of Jarl Hungwar!

"That knife was meant for thee, Wanderer," Wahrmund said; "and I, by wearing thy cloak, came nigh to getting it in my ribs. I owe my life to thee, Wanderer, and I shall not forget it."

Then when the morning broke, the war-horns sounded and the men prepared for battle; and the great ships, with their crews, stood off to go back to Denmark; and the vikings laughed and said —

"There is no going back now. Go forward we must; and if we conquer not, then we perish."

And it was told to Hungwar concerning Wiglaf, and he laughed darkly, and said that Wiglaf was ever good at paying his debts, and that he was a good man slain; but he said nothing of the shame of the nithing's deed.

Now in the morning came messengers to the Danish camp, saying that they were sent by Edmund, the King of East Anglia, to demand why strangers came to his country with fire and sword, and what was the cause of quarrel between them.

"King Edmund seeks not war," they said. "So now either give hostages that you will dwell peaceably during your stay, or else begone."

Then loud and long laughed the viking chiefs; and Hungwar answered —

"This Edmund of thine will treat us as churlishly as he did the son of Sigurd! Now go and bid him come and do homage to us. And tell him to pull down his churches, and to scourge his priests away and to worship Thor; or, by Odin and his friends, there shall be ruin and death in all the land; and what we have done elsewhere, that will we also do here."

And then Hubba spake, and said —

"This Edmund desires hostages, and hostages shall he have"; and he commanded that the heads of all the messengers save one should be struck off and put in a sack. Then he cut off the ears of the last one and bade him go back and give the heads to his king, as a present from the sea-kings, and tell him that so he would be served, if he gave not up his false god.

But the Saxon was noble and brave; and, though he was alone and in sore pain, and the vikings all around, he cast the shame in Hubba's teeth, and he said that neither the King nor his subjects would worship

pagan gods or turn from the Lord Christ, let what would follow.

"Drive him from the camp," said Hubba; and the brave messenger was scourged away, amidst the vikings' laughter.

But Wulnoth did not laugh, for his soul was heavy and his heart troubled; for it seemed to him that this was a shame deed to slay messengers who did but their duty; and he could not but think that the Saxon who had thus answered seemed nobler and grander than the mightiest of the vikings.

Then the Danes put the battle in order, and they marched inland; and on the next day they saw the army of the East Saxons drawn up, and they waved their weapons, and cried in joy —

"Greeting, worshippers of the White Christ. Let Him fight for you this day, for you need aid."

But the Saxons answered not; only as their priests passed along their ranks they bowed their heads in prayer, while the Danes mocked.

Then the battle commenced, and the slingers cast their stones, and the archers sped their arrows, and the light spears whistled as they were hurled; and then the ranks of the warriors closed, and the sword sang, and the shield received the blow, and fierce the fight raged; but still the Danes were victorious, and drove the forces of the Saxons back, so that they were scattered like the leaves before the wind; and at last King Edmund himself took to flight, while the vikings, with many shouts, spread over the land, slaying all

whom they found and sending the red flames through many a roof.

And some chosen warriors pursued the King, and Wulnoth was amongst the number; and so hard did they press him that, at last, he sprang from his horse and sped down the bank of a stream, and hid beneath a bridge, hoping that the foe would pass on without seeing him.

And now happened a sad thing for Edmund the King; for there came a young man and his wife, and they had but been married that day; and as they crossed the bridge, seeking to escape from the Danes who were everywhere, they espied the moonlight shining on the golden spurs of the King; and the man crept down and saw who thus lay in the water; but the man was a nithing who knew no shame.

For the King made him swear that he would not betray his hiding-place; but the man and his wife fell in with the pirates, and they were seized and brought before Hungwar who questioned them, whether they had seen the King; and the man, to save his life and the life of his wife, led them to the place where King Edmund lay hidden, and there the Danes caught him and made him prisoner.

And the King when he knew who had betrayed him spoke, and laid a curse on the bridge, and said that whoever crossed it to get married should have that curse fall on their shoulders.

But the man who had betrayed the King did not escape, for Hungwar ordered both him and his wife to

be slain — so little was the word of the viking to be trusted.

Then the Danes carried King Edmund back to their camp, and heavy chains were placed upon his arms and legs, though he was a king; and he was placed in the holdas' hall, where the chief jarls and the kings gathered; and there they made mock of him and laughed him to scorn, and asked him where was his Christ in Whom he trusted?

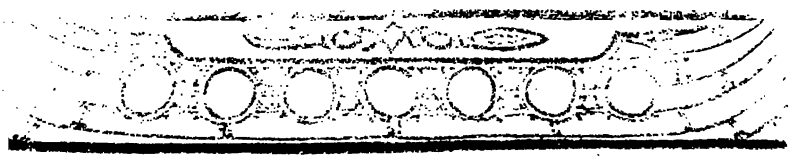
And Wulnoth was there, leaning on his spear nigh the door; and he looked upon the face of the King standing there amidst his foes, and thought how calm and noble he looked.

For this Edmund had the blue eyes of the Saxon, and the long yellow hair that Wulnoth remembered so well; and his mien was lofty and calm, and his manner that of one who feared no death, though he grieved for the loss of his people.

And when they asked him where his Lord was,[1] Edmund the King looked up and smiled, and his smile was one of peace, and he pointed to the sky and made answer —

"There, in His glory, sits the Lord," he said, "and He alone is God"; and at that Hungwar cast his glove and smote him in the face.

[1] It was at a place called Hoxne, in Sussex, that this battle was fought; and the spot where it is said that King Edmund hid is known as Goldbridge. Whether the story of the king cursing the place is true or not, the legend was known at Hoxne until quite recently; and no bride or bridegroom would venture to cross Goldbridge upon their wedding day.



"Thy God cannot deliver thee from even that; and how shall He deliver thee from our wrath?" he shouted. "Now, Edmund, who wast king of this land, I am minded to spare thy life on certain conditions. First, thou shalt strip all thine altars and cast them down, and give the gold to me; and if thou do it not, then be sure that I shall. Then shalt thou do homage to me here in my camp, and call me thy overlord; and, lastly, thou shalt sing a song to Odin and to Thor, and to the gods which were worshipped from of old by the people of the North. How sayest thou?"

"Thus do I say, O Hungwar," answered the King calmly. "I will do none of these things. I will not give thee the gold from God's altar; and be thou sure that though He holds me unworthy to guard His house, He will find a champion to do so. I will not call thee my king; and I will not worship Thor or any false gods, for there is one God alone, and the Lord Christ is His Son."

"Now," thought Wulnoth, "this man is mad; for what does it matter what god a man calls on so long as he saves his life?" Yet, for all that, he thought it shame that his captors should treat the King so.

But that was not the worst that the Danes did to Edmund of East Anglia; for, after his words, they led him out into the midst of the camp, and, though he was a king, they beat him and scourged him with whips till the flesh was torn and the blood flowed; and then they asked him whether he would deny his Lord and worship Odin as Hungwar ordered. But the King

spoke, and his voice was heavy with pain, but his reply was without hesitation —

"My Lord was scourged for my sins," he said, "and I will be scourged for His sake, and rejoice that it is so."

"Now," thought Wulnoth, "this beating of a brave man is a nithing deed, and these Danes are but as ravening beasts, while this is a man indeed." Yet he was powerless to do aught, for he was one amongst twenty thousand.

And when the reply of the tortured King was heard, then Hungwar added torture to torture. And they twisted his chains and placed sticks beneath the links, until the flesh was all bruised and the bones broke; yet still the King would give no answer, but that he bore all for his Lord's sake.

"Surely the man is a fool," growled Wahrmund; "for why else would he bear this torture?" But Wulnoth answered —

"Surely the man is a hero, and he defies his enemies and will not let them triumph over him; while, as for these holdas who stand by and see a man put to such shame, I think little of them."

"Thou hadst best say less than thou thinkest, then," said Wahrmund significantly, "or we may have thee taking thy place beside yonder tortured man."

"Is there no pain can wring consent from thee?" said Hungwar darkly when again he knew that King Edmund had defied him; and the King answered him bravely —

"There is no pain shall make me deny my Lord."

"Now be not foolish, man," cried Guthrun, who liked not this sport. "A word will save thee." But the King answered —

"That word I will never speak."

Then Hungwar the Dane gave command, and they carried King Edmund out and tied him to a great tree; and the vikings took their bows and their casting spears and made him their target; and the task was to wound the King and bring blood with each arrow or spear cast, yet not to hurt him so that his life would be endangered.

From the morn till the afternoon did they thus torture him, until his poor body was so cut and marred that it could not be seen for wounds and blood; and the King's head drooped, and his eyes closed from weariness and pain.

Now Wulnoth stood near the King, and he was filled with wonder, and with pity, and with disgust that a brave man should be so treated; and when the vikings rested from their sport he drew near, and he said in low tones —

"Listen to me, O King. Save thee I cannot; but I can make an end for thee. I will stand and cast my spear, and I will take care that it pierces thy heart, and so sleep shall come to thee."

But the King lifted his head, and opened his patient eyes, and said —

"Nay, friend. I know that to do this would cost thee thy right hand; and for me the end is not far off,

and I can be patient. My Lord was smitten with a spear for me, and I will suffer the spear for His glory; He Who is stronger than the strongest will strengthen me; and from my death will good come, for the Holy Church is watered with the blood of her sons."

Now all this was as a dark saying to Wulnoth, and he could make nothing of it. Only he knew that this man, who was now no more a king, and who was now nigh to death, had something which he possessed not, something which made him grand and glorious, and strong even in weakness, and patient in suffering; and the King looked at him again, and spoke once more —

"Seek thou unto Him, friend," he said. "For He giveth peace and joy for sorrow and labor, and with Him death's darkness turneth to light."

And then Wulnoth looked again, and he saw that around the King's neck a little cross hung. And the King asked him to lift it to his lips that he might kiss it ere he died, and Wulnoth, wondering and fearing, obeyed.

Then from his hall came Hungwar, and with him came Biorn Ironsides, and Sidroc, and Frena, and many jarls, and he stood before the King and asked him again whether he would agree to worship Odin and deny the White Christ.

But the King opened his eyes again, and he said calmly —

"Trouble me no more, Hungwar, son of Regner. Thou hast done thy worst, and thou hast had thy pleasure, and I have borne in silence. Now make an end and

trouble me no more, for, had I fifty lives, and each could take a lifetime in dying, I still would not do this thing which thou dost command, thou bloodthirsty and wicked pirate of the Northland."

Then Hungwar stamped his foot, and he dashed his fist in the calm face, and he ordered his men to take the King and smite off his head.

For Hungwar was weary of seeing King Edmund resist, and moreover some of the Danish holdas who were more noble of heart than he, said that this was a shame deed which was being done in their midst, while Guthrun said openly that though he loved to slay a man in fair fight, he had no love for serving a hero shamefully, and that if Hungwar liked not his words then they two would go hold holmgang together.

But that was no part of Hungwar's plans. He had no wish to have his force divided and quarrelling as did the Saxons, and so he gave the word; and Wulnoth was amongst those who saw the King die.

"You are to die," they told him, and King Edmund answered —

"To die is to live again."

Then they smote off his head, and so sleep came for the King of the East Saxons.

Now, this is how the Danes beat the men of East Anglia, and put their king to the torture.[1]

[1] The body of King Edmund was at first buried secretly by his friends, but afterwards it was taken up and carried to Badriches-worth, now called Bury St. Edmunds; and here, later, a monastery was founded in honor of the Martyr King, by the Danish King Canute, himself a Christian.

CHAPTER XI

How Wulnoth met with Wyborga again

NOW after the slaying of Edmund the King, the Danes cast his body into a field as though it were but the body of some base-born slave, and even those who had cried shame forgot all about it, and went back to their feasting; for what was one foe more or less? And as to burying the body, the viking lords were too busy slaying to think of burying, and the dogs and the crows would soon make an end of the corpse.

But the heart of Wulnoth was heavy within him at this murder, for so he felt it was, and he thought within himself that these Danes were ill masters to serve. Yet he would not leave them, because he knew not whom else to follow, and also because he felt in his heart that there was a matter yet to be settled between Hungwar and himself; and moreover, unless he tarried, how should he ever learn the fate of Guthred his friend?

Now that night all over the land there shone the glare of flames, telling of the work which was being done by the Danish bands, but in the camp the leaders stayed and feasted.

Some were for pushing on at once, but Hungwar was too cunning for that, and he said that it was ill to put too great a distance between themselves and the sea until their ships returned with more of their men, seeing that they were safe where they were.

"The army of the East Saxons is destroyed," he said, "and will not come against us again; therefore here will we abide for the time, and the people shall serve us, and presently we will march into Mercia and join our brethren there."

Most agreed to this, but some grumbled, and in the end left Hungwar and marched inland, and amongst these was Hubba, but that was not yet.

Now on the night of the killing of the King, Wulnoth took his spear in his hand, and, with his sword by his side, he wandered into the darkness, for his mind was full of restless thoughts, and he cared not whither his feet bore him.

And as he went he thought of Wyborga and the little cross she had made, and the wonder tale which Edgiva had told him, and of the way in which the King had died for his Lord; and he wondered also whether the tales of the gods of the Northland were true tales or false, and he wondered whither he must go to seek the strongest and the mightiest lord, now that old Regner Lodbrok was dead.

And as he wandered he came to a wood, and he entered its darkness and solitude, for he had little fear of meeting any foe, all having fled far from the Danes, and only the churls remaining, and they would be more afraid of him than he need be of them.

It was quiet here, and reminded him of the woods in distant Lethra, where he had walked with Edgiva the Beautiful in the happy days. And the Danes had destroyed Lethra and laid it in ruins — and yet he was serving with the Danes! Wulnoth shook his spear at that thought, and he said aloud —

"Yet for the while I will tarry, and presently I will speak a word with the sons of Regner for the deeds they have done to those dear to me, and then shall Hungwar know who the Wanderer is and why he has joined him."

And then he paused and stared in wonder, thinking that some night hag must be playing with him, for from the darkness came the voice of Edgiva the Beautiful, and it said —

"Greeting, Wanderer, who wast called Wulnoth!"

"Who art thou who callest to me with the voice of my Princess?" he cried. "Whoever thou art, good or evil, show thyself I command thee by the name of Thor."

"Little care I for that name, Wanderer," the voice answered, and then there was silence, and he called again and again, but without success.

Then just as he would have turned back, another voice spoke and said —

"Greeting, Wulnoth!" and this time he made out a figure coming towards him. And he sprang forward and caught at it, saying —

"Now who art thou who walkest by night and callest greeting to me?"

"One whom thou hast known as a friend, Wulnoth," came the reply, and Wulnoth knew the voice then for that of Wyborga the Wise, and he cried, trembling with eagerness —

"O Wyborga, is it thou? How dost thou come into this land? Then I was not deceived when I thought that my Princess spoke to me not long since! O Wyborga, lead me to her, for I have sought her with a long and weary seeking, and my heart failed me at last."

But Wyborga answered —

"No, Wulnoth, for it has already been told to thee that you two will not meet again to abide until thou hast learnt the wonder tale, which thou hast till now rejected."

"The story of the White Christ?" said Wulnoth. "Oh, Wyborga, I have heard that tale, but it seems to me an idle saga and fit for nithings."

"Wulnoth," said Wyborga gravely, "there was one in yonder camp of murderers who was not a nithing, and yet who believed in that tale."

"The Saxon King!" he said. "Ah, Wyborga, I dare not ask thee how thou dost know that, for thou knowest so many things, thou woman of mystery. But this I say — that King was a brave man, and they who

put him to shame are cowards even though they are brave in the war game."

"Tell me how he died, Wulnoth," said Wyborga. "Tell me all." And he obeyed, while Wyborga listened with bent head and with many a sigh.

"So does the Lord desire of His people," she said when he finished, "and so does Edmund gain a better crown than the golden one of earth."

"I understand not your words," Wulnoth made answer. "They are still dark with mystery — all the world is a puzzle to me now, and where to seek for Guthred the Prince I know not. Cannot you speak clearly to me, Wyborga?"

"Edgiva spoke clearly, Wulnoth, but you could not understand her tale."

"But that was of the White Christ," he cried. "Does everything refer to Him?" And Wyborga said —

"Everything is to Him."

Then there was silence for a space, and Wulnoth spoke again and asked of Edgiva; and Wyborga made reply and inquired whether he would like to see her.

"To see Edgiva, O Wyborga!" he cried. "I would do anything to see my Princess again." And Wyborga nodded.

"Now I will test thee, Wulnoth, and there shall be nothing of dishonor in my request. Tell me first, where is the body of the King?"

This Wulnoth told to her, and then Wyborga said —

"Now listen, Wulnoth. Thou art to stand here

without moving, and there will come to thee a man. Him thou must lead stealthily into the camp, and if any meet thee, thou must pass him off as a companion. Canst thou do this?"

"Easily can it be done, Wyborga, for the camp is feasting now, and only the watchers are at their posts."

"That is good, then," the wise woman replied. "Now thou must guide this man, asking no questions, to the place where the dead King is thrown, and thou must help him to bear the body without the camp. Wilt thou do this?"

"Yea, Wyborga, for there is no harm in it; and if, as I suppose, this man is the King's man, seeking to do honor to the dead, then will I gladly do it. But how may I see Edgiva?"

"When thy work is done the reward shall be sure, Wulnoth. The man who will go with thee will tell thee how and when thou shalt see the Princess."

But then an angry suspicion came to Wulnoth, and he cried —

"O Wyborga, of old the Princess told me that she had a Lord. Now is this man her lord, or was the dead King her lord, that she is in his country?"

"Set thy heart at rest, Wulnoth," replied Wyborga. "Edgiva's Lord is the Lord for Whose honor the King died. Thou art hasty and foolish, and therefore trouble has been thine. Be patient now, and remember that as of old, I am thy friend."

"I will trust you, Wyborga," Wulnoth answered.

And then Wyborga called softly thrice, like the

cry of the wood owl, and a step sounded, and through the bushes a man came and greeted Wyborga.

"Thou hast called, good mother," he said. "Then thy mission is successful, and thou hast found some one who can guide me, and who will help me?"

"I have found some one," answered Wyborga, and then again she turned to Wulnoth and addressed him by his name of Wanderer.

"Wanderer, this is the man I spoke of; and were it not that I know thee to be brave and true, I would not have trusted thee, for though thou knowest it not, thou hast a great treasure — ay, the hope of this land in thy hand. Wanderer, guard this man as thou wouldst guard thine own life — nay, more closely even, for thy life thou wouldst risk, but this man's life thou must not risk. Only because a holy duty is to be done shall this danger be run."

"Now," thought Wulnoth, "this must be some son of the dead King who will seek to reign in his stead. But that matters not. I will guide him and so shall I see my Princess again, and if any try to hinder me, well, it will mean hard blows will be given."

Then he loosened his sword in its sheath, and he turned to the man, saying simply —

"Come with me, stranger, and tread boldly. To do otherwise might be to make suspicion. Thou art one of the soldiers returning with me, and thou must laugh and sing and be merry; so shall we pass through the camp without fear."

"Atheling!" cried Wyborga in alarm. And Wulnoth thought to himself —

"So I am right! We have a prince here," for so the word meant in the Saxon.

But the man laughed and said —

"Have no fear, my good mother, for the way this good man advises is the best. 'T is often safer when we wish to hide something to place it where all may see it, and the best disguise may be to appear to desire to be seen. Come, Wanderer, since so you are called, and we will go about our work."

"I am ready," answered Wulnoth. "Farewell, Wyborga, and greet me to my Princess. 'T is for her that I undertake this work to-night."

"Thy Princess greets thee, Wulnoth, but not in the name of Thor."

It was Edgiva's voice again! Then she was somewhere near at hand, hidden in the darkness of the forest. Wulnoth stopped, but the voice spoke again, bidding him hasten to his task, and so, muttering to himself that all this was too deep for him to understand, Wulnoth accompanied the stranger from the wood towards the Danish camp.

And when they drew near to it he said to the other —

"Now there is much danger here. Shall I go by myself and bear the body out to you?"

"Nay, friend," came the quiet answer. "I have faced danger before. Do thou lead the way and I will follow."

"So be it," answered Wulnoth, and they went in, passing the guard who, knowing Wulnoth, took no notice of his companion.

There was little to fear. The Danes knew that no foe was near, for their bands had come in with the report that they had driven the East Saxons far afield, and now all were resting from the labor, and telling their tales of the fight, and but few were away from the camp fires.

So on the two went, talking as though they were friends, and the stranger acted his part well and laughed as though he had been in the war game himself, though when they passed a watch fire Wulnoth noted that his face was stern and his eyes gleamed, and he thought that presently this man would indeed be in the war game and avenge the story of that day's fight.

A young man was he and without the girth and strength of the viking men. But his face was noble and his brow high, and a crisp red-brown beard graced his mouth and chin.

So they reached the place where the body of the dead King had been thrown, and lo, a man stood there guarding it, and at sight of that Wulnoth gripped his sword.

But the man rose and spoke, and it was Wahrmund's voice, and he asked who they were and what they did there; and to him Wulnoth answered —

"Wahrmund," he said, "thou art a brave man who loves not to see a hero put to shame."

"And for that cause am I here, Wanderer," the

Dane replied. "For there was a sneaking wolf howled, and methought that so brave a man should not become wolf's food. Therefore, to-night I watch, and to-morrow will I bury the body of this hero, so deep that no wolf can dig it up."

"Wahrmund, there be others who would bury the body of this man with the honor due to a fallen hero," Wulnoth made reply, "and I have such a one with me. We come to carry this body without the camp, that it may be given honor and have a death-song sung."

"And thou hast brought a stranger within the camp, Wanderer," was the stern retort. "That is not right."

"Then to-morrow let me pay for it, if you think it wrong, comrade. But for the sake of a brave man who died well, let him now take the King's body away."

Then gruff old Wahrmund smote his spear into the ground and swore a lusty oath.

"Now, Wanderer, my mind misgives me that we two are doing that for which our heads may leave our bodies," he growled, "but still it shall be done. So lend me thy aid and we will lift this hero from his humble bed and bear him away."

"I knew that thou wert a true comrade, Wahrmund," said Wulnoth. But the Dane answered —

"I knew that thou wert a fool, Wanderer; and thou dost make me one, and, by Thor, perhaps I love thee the better for the doing of it."

Reverently did the young stranger take the severed

head from Wulnoth; and he bowed his head for the moment over it, while the other two lifted their heavy burden.

"Now, how shall we bear this through the camp?" mused Wulnoth. And his friend answered —

"We will not bear it through the camp; we will cross from here to the forest. There are no sentries on this side that I know."

And so quietly the two carried their burden, the stranger walking beside them with the head, and when they reached the shelter of the wood they laid the body down and asked what next was to be done and whither it was to be borne.

"Leave it here with me," answered the stranger, "and all will be well. For you, kind foe, my best thanks." This he said to Wahrmund, who growled again, feeling perhaps a little ashamed of himself that he had been led into doing this thing; and the stranger turned to Wulnoth —

"To you I am bidden to say that if you wait here to-morrow night, about this hour, that which you most desire shall be, and a messenger will be here to guide you."

"Thou wilt give yon hero honor?" growled Wahrmund. "He should be buried with honor." And the stranger smiled —

"If thou dost want to see that, warrior, come thou with thy friend to-morrow and see for thyself —"

"How do you know that you can trust me, and how do I know that I can trust you, Saxon?" the

Dane asked mockingly; and the Saxon answered calmly —

"I can trust a man who is noble enough to watch by the body of a shamed hero through the long night hours."

"Good," said Wahrmund. "Then how may I know that I can trust you?"

"You may trust me," answered the other, "because for that which you have done I am grateful. Not even to a foe does a true man repay kindness with ingratitude." And again Wahrmund said, "Good."

"I know not who you are, stranger; but I know you to be a true man," he said. "One day we may meet face to face in the war game, but to-morrow night we will meet, as thou sayest, in peace."

"Till then, farewell," said the stranger; and then the two turned and went. And the stranger called like the wood owl, and from the shadows came silent ones, who lifted the dead King and bore him away, with sound of weeping and lamentation.

Now, this is how Wulnoth met Wyborga the Wise in the woods of East Anglia, and this is how the body of King Edmund was carried from the camp of the Danes.

CHAPTER XII

How Wulnoth and Wahrmund visited the Christian Church

NOW, on the morning after Wulnoth had aided in the carrying away of the King's body, there was trouble in the Danish camp, because one who had gone into the field to view the remains of the victim of Hungwar's cruelty found no trace left; and this he thought strange.

And, though the Danes were fierce and cruel, there were some amongst them noble enough to reverence a brave man who could suffer in patience as King Edmund had done; and these, like Guthrun, declared that Hungwar's deed was a shame deed, and one to be repented of.

And these, when they heard that the body was gone, declared that this was the work of the gods, because they were angry that the King had been slain. And some said that they had seen the King fly up into the clouds, borne along by the storm sisters; and others

declared that he had stalked through the camp, his head in his hand, and had vanished into the forest.

But then, there are always people ready to fancy that they have seen such wonders as these, and others who will say that they have seen, even if they know it false; so the Danish leaders shook their heads and laughed when they heard, and said that the warriors had drunk too deeply from their ale horns the night before.

But Hungwar was troubled and angry, for he liked not to hear such tales; and he felt, moreover, that some treachery was abroad, or that foes had been in the camp and taken the body away.

"Why trouble thy head about it?" laughed Hubba, his brother. "The carrion is gone. The wolves have eaten it." But to that Hungwar answered —

"Wolves leave bones, brother, and there be no bones left here. There is treason amongst us, brother, and woe be to the man who is guilty if I find him out."

"Wanderer," said Wahrmund to his friend, that same morning, "methinks we played a daring game last night, and methinks that if it were known to our leaders, our tarrying in this world would be short and painful. Art thou determined to go through with this business to-night?"

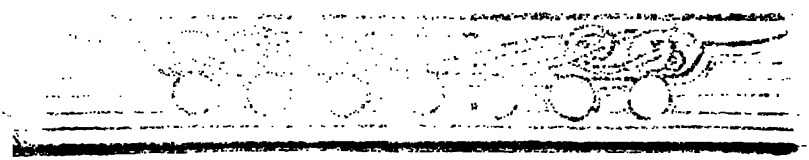
"I am determined," answered Wulnoth firmly. "But come thou not, friend, if thou art minded to keep away. I will see this thing to the end; for there is one I seek to see, and I will give my life in payment, if need be."

"Thy princess, as thou dost call her, comrade?" laughed Wahrmund. "Ah! I know. So do a pair of pretty eyes lead brave men to danger and death. But hark to me, comrade"; and he lowered his voice. "I tell thee this because I love thee for a brave man, and because I read things quickly. There was some talk of a beautiful child in those days when we destroyed Lethra, and much was Hungwar angered that he could not find her. Now, if this princess of thine be she whom I suppose, look to it that Hungwar hear not of it, or there will be trouble. She is not a child now, but maiden grown; and Hungwar would not do the hunting and leave thee to take the spoil. Look to it, Wulnoth, for the son of Regner is crafty, as well as fierce; and there may be trouble for thee and thy princess yet."

Wulnoth thanked his friend for his counsel, and he thought to himself that if ever things came to that pass there would be trouble for Hungwar also; but that thought he kept from his comrade, for Wahrmund was of Hungwar's band, and Wulnoth would not do aught to make him false to his oath.

All day long the Danes roamed, hunting and sporting; and often, alas, hunting human game, driving, harrying, slaying, all the unhappy churls with whom they met, and burning their poor houses to the ground.

For this was the leader's counsel — "Here we must make a stronghold," they said, "and none but our own men must remain in the land. Then, when we have played the war game, and driven our foes before us,



we will make the Saxons become our thralls, and they shall labor for us while we live at ease."

And, truly, in East Anglia it seemed as if this would be; for the people had become filled with fear and hopeless, and they thought no more of fighting these fierce strangers, who came in swarms, as the gnats rise from the pools, but they either fled and left all or else came and offered service, begging for life only.

Now in the evening, when the shadows grew, and the holdas gathered in their hall, and told their tales and drank their brown ale and wine, then Wulnoth and Wahrmund went their way towards the forest, thinking that no man would notice their absence. But Hungwar, as he sat with his friends, glanced with quick suspicious eyes adown the hall, and he saw that Wulnoth and Wahrmund were away, and he remembered that they had been away the night before; and he said naught, but resolved to watch them closely, for he hated Wulnoth, he knew not why, and he knew that Wahrmund was his friend.

And into the forest the friends went, spear in hand and sword by side, for no man might go safely unless he bore his weapons; and presently, when they came to the place where they had parted from the stranger the night before, a low hooting of the wood owl was heard, and from the deep shadows a man stepped and saluted them.

"Greeting, Hacos, both," he said, in low tones, using the name by which the Saxons call a stranger from the Northland. "Ye are to follow me."

"Hold!" cried Wahrmund, ever a wary old soldier. "That is all very well, my friend. But how do we know it? We indeed came hither to meet one, but that one you are not; and how are we to know that you come from him and are not a foe seeking to lead us to our doom?"

"The thorn-crowned cross," answered the man. "The Wanderer will know of it."

"In truth I do know," cried Wulnoth. "We may follow, Wahrmund; for if he were not sent by my friends he would not have given me that token."

"Follow then," growled the Dane, shouldering his spear, "and follow close; for, by Thor, this darkness is such that a man might walk into the presence of his worst foes, and be none the wiser until the sword or knife told him of it."

"The way is somewhat long," the guide said calmly. "Of that I warn you, and it is hard to tread."

"Little care we for that," was the answer he received. "We have trodden no easy paths of late. Lead on, and we follow."

So through the forest they went, and in the shadow a voice challenged and their guide answered. And thrice did this happen, showing to them that, after all, the soldiers of East Anglia still remained in the land and kept watch and ward over the secret paths.

Then they came from the woodland, and saw before them, in the dim light, pools and streams of water stretching all around; and the guide said —

"Follow closely in my steps, for there is death here

for any who stray." And Wahrmund grunted, for he liked not the road they trod, where the feet sank into yielding soil at every step, and the air was full of the croakings of frogs and the cries of night birds.

And here again they were challenged twice, and the guide gave answer ere they were allowed to proceed; and so going they came to the water's edge where, silent and motionless, men awaited them with a boat.

"Ah!" grunted Wahrmund, "this is better. The water is the viking's land, and better than those forests or the swampy plains. Have we far to go, guide? for methinks that time passes."

"You shall be safely back at your camp ere the dawn breaks in the east," answered the guide. "Now be silent and prepare to see sights of which you know nothing yet."

The boat crossed to an island, and here they stepped ashore, again being challenged; and then, in the centre of the isle, which was but small, they saw a building, surrounded by trees to screen it from the passers-by, and here the guide paused and uttered his cry again; and at that, from the yawning portal a man emerged, clad in a gray robe which reached to his feet.

"Who are these, my son?" he asked. And the guide replied —

"Those whom I was bidden bring, father. Now I leave them in thy keeping."

"It is well. Follow me, friends, and be silent and solemn; and, moreover, remember that ye go into the presence of the Most High."

There was something awe-inspiring in his solemn words; and he, without awaiting their reply, led the way into this building, passing along a low, narrow way, arched o'erhead, and pausing at a door whereat a man sat.

"Enter," he said, "and once again I pray you be silent, and remember that it is only because the Atheling and a royal lady have desired this, that we let your eyes behold our worship. Enter," and stepping aside he suffered them to go in.

And what a strange place it was! For the moment their eyes seemed blinded by the light — light that came from a hundred lamps. Then, as they grew accustomed to the radiance, they were able to look around and examine their surroundings.

It was not a very spacious apartment, but it was very beautiful. Massive stone pillars in long rows supported the arched roof, and the windows were ornamented with curious carvings in stone work. But it was not at columns, nor roof, nor at windows, that they looked, but at the scene directly facing them, for such a scene they had never viewed before.

There uprose above five stone steps a lofty altar, draped in white and crimson and gold, and many a gem and much precious metal in its workings; and there, directly in front of this, was a bier, upon which rested the body of the martyred King Edmund.

Calm and dignified did the royal face look in death, and all the pain and weariness had left the features. The hair fell on either side of the wax-like brow, upon which

his golden crown now rested; and behind the bier, rising over it as though it were guarding the sleeping King, rose a cross. Ay, a cross, yet not an empty one, for on it hung One nailed there by hands and feet.

All the skill of the sculptor, all the cunning of the painter, had been expended upon that work; and as the two rough Northmen looked, they held their breath in awe, for the blue eyes, so gentle and yet so kingly, seemed to glance across at them; and the whole attitude of the Sufferer seemed to speak of infinite pity and love, so that Wahrmund drew a deep breath and whispered to his companion —

"By Thor! 'T is a god yonder. 'T is Balder the Beautiful, who watches from yon cross, over the couch of death!"

"Hush!" answered Wulnoth in the same tone — he could not take his eyes from that figure. Without word being spoken to him he saw what a poor blind fool he had been. If this was the image of Him Whom the Christians worshipped, He was no coward and nithing, but the greatest, the grandest, the noblest of all the sons of men.

Then they noticed yet another thing — the body of the King was guarded, for on either side of the bier a man knelt — a young man, clad in royal attire, and upon the head of one of the two glittered a kingly crown.

"Yon kneeling man is he we saw in the wood last night — he whom we aided," whispered Wahrmund, and Wulnoth nodded.

But now came a sound of soft music, sweet and strange, now sinking into a whisper, now rising into a flood, and with it the voices of singers raising a death-song.

But a strange death-song, truly, for the death-songs of the North were to the honor of the heroes and spoke of their deeds, but this song was to the White Christ and to the God of Heaven, and it spoke no word of praise about the dead king, but only told of humble trust in the Crucified One.

Then into the building the singers swept, all veiled in long robes — some men, some graceful maidens, and —

Wulnoth started and fixed his anxious eyes upon one of that throng — surely he knew that voice — surely he recognized that figure — surely beneath that robe the beauty of Edgiva was hidden!

But if it was the Princess she gave no sign. The singers slowly passed up to the altar and divided into two parties, one on either side, and the two watchers rose up and stood by the bier, as kingly a pair of young men as the eye might look upon, though he whom they had spoken with the evening before looked pale and as if sickness had been his portion.

Then there came other men, priests, led by one tall and dignified, and they sang praises to God, and offered prayers, and spoke of the Crucified as Lord of Lords and King of Kings. And the two watchers stood there with hearts filled with wonder and awe, for though they could not understand, yet there was something

both grand and dreadful in this worship, and yet, withal, it was winning, like the sweet scent of the flowers or the song of the birds, or the whisper of the sea upon a summer's day. It was something which seemed to get into their hearts, and made them long for they knew not what, with a longing which was sweet and painful.

And then the aged priest, for such they divined the man to be, stood and spoke of the dead King and the work which he had tried to do, and how he had been tried and was faithful, choosing rather the tortures of the Danes than the denying of his Lord, and how, though he had passed through the gates of death, yet in his Lord he lived and reigned in glory forever.

And then he paused and turned to the two young men, and called them the hope of the Church, and bade them be strong in the Lord and gird themselves for battle.

"Strong are the foe and terrible," he said. "Many as the sands of the sea and mighty as Bashan, but in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength, and He Who could strengthen Gideon, and make Jephthah conquer, shall also make you mighty. Go forward, hope of the Church — go forward, avengers of the noble Edmund — go forward and quit yourselves like men, and the Lord shall give you the victory, and deliver His Church from the powers of darkness and from the violence of the spoiler."

Then the two young men knelt again, and the priest placed his hands upon them and blessed them; and then the men in long robes came and took up the body of the

dead King and carried it away. And in one portion of the building was the dark entrance to an underground vault, and into this they lowered the bier, while all there sang hymns of victory to God for victory over death. And this was the burying of the King of the East Saxons.

Then two by two the procession was formed, and, headed by the priest, they swept all round the building, coming nigh the spot where Wulnoth and his companion stood in the shadow, and the eyes of Wulnoth followed that one figure, his heart telling him that this was Edgiva the Beautiful.

And then, just as she reached the spot where he stood, for one moment a tiny hand appeared from beneath the shrouding cloak, and a fair blossom dropped at his feet. Then, ere he could speak or move, she had passed on, and the church was empty.

"Now," said Wahrmund, speaking in low tones, "we have seen strange things over which a man needs ponder deeply. But methinks, comrade, all is done now, and we had best look for our guide."

Then, ere Wulnoth could answer, a curtain was drawn aside from an arching doorway, and the man with whom they had come hither stood before them.

Now, this is how Wulnoth saw the burying of King Edmund, and this is how he looked upon the image of Him Whom he had called a nithing.

CHAPTER XIII

Of How Wulnoth met with Edgiva again

HE man held the curtain aside and invited them to follow him.

"The Atheling bids you come," he said. "And he says to him called the Wanderer that not yet has he received that reward which was promised to him."

"Come, Wanderer," laughed Wahrmund, "we may as well go through with it now. By Thor! 't is strange that I, a Dane, should be amongst these Saxons, but I feel inclined to see this to the end. How sayest thou?"

Little need to ask Wulnoth such a question, for the one desire of his heart was to see his Princess. Therefore the two followed their guide, and were ushered into an apartment where sat the two men whom they had seen watching in the church.

And the younger, he who did not wear the crown, came to welcome them and said —

"Greeting, friends, and again thanks for the aid you rendered me in securing honor for King Edmund's body."

Then he turned to the other, and went on —

"Ethelred, my royal and dear brother, these are the two of whom I told you, and to their help are we indebted, for otherwise it would have been a hard matter to gain the body of the martyr."

"We thank you from our hearts, strangers," said the one called Ethelred. And Wahrmund whispered to his friend —

"By Thor! 'T is Ethelred, the King of the West Saxons. He is son of the noble Ethelwulf the Bretwalda, and the other must be his brother, the Atheling Alfred."

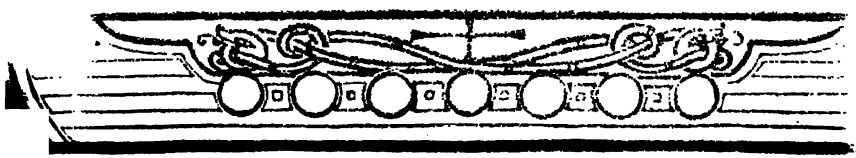
Then did the King continue, looking hard at Wulnoth, and he said —

"But what is this? We have no Dane here, brother! This hair and those blue eyes are surely of the land of our fathers!"

"That is so, royal brother," answered Alfred. "According to all I have heard from the wise Wyborga, this man is of the noble house of Cerdic, he from whom our own house also traces its descent."

"Is that so?" the King cried. "It is good in one way, and yet 't is strange to think of one of such royal blood joining our foes."

"Strange is this man's story, my brother," Alfred replied. "I have it as it was told to me," and he told the King how Wulnoth came to Lethra with his father and of all that had happened since.



But the King shook his head as he listened, and said that this did not explain how Wulnoth came to be in Hungwar's army, seeing that it was Hungwar who gave Lethra to fire and sword.

So Wulnoth spoke, and told how he had two tasks to do — one to find Guthred the Prince, and the other to find the mightiest and the strongest. And at that Alfred the Atheling smiled gently.

"Now, brother," he said to the King, "this is a task for priests, and perchance a fair teacher whom we two wot of, and not for us. Thou seest how this man chances to be with the Danes, and thou seest how 't is but a step to discovering that for which he seeks. Let this good warrior" — and he pointed to Wahrmund — "tarry here with us and let the other go to his reward."

But the King looked grave and he said slowly —

"This man is a thrall, and Edgiva is a king's daughter."

"This man is of our blood, and can noble blood be debased because a thrall collar is placed upon the neck? My word is pledged, brother, that this man shall see the lady, and I pray you to allow it."

"Let it be so," said the King, and the Atheling laughed. "Follow me, O Wanderer," he said to Wulnoth; and as the Wanderer obeyed, he heard the deep laugh of Wahrmund, and the words —

"Of a truth, O King, a wondrous thing is love. You might offer yon man a golden crown now, and he would not take it in exchange for a few moments with a fair maiden."

The Atheling led Wulnoth to another chamber and bade him wait there, and presently there came a light step, and Edgiva stood before him, holding out her hands with a smile upon her lips.

And when Wulnoth saw her all his strength seemed to go, and only a great love seized upon him so that he dropped on his knees and took her hands and kissed them, and cried, as if he had been a weak woman and not a mighty man, and he said —

"O my Princess! my Princess! I have wandered far to see you, and my heart has grown weary with longing. Why have you hidden yourself from me all this time, and I was your watcher who guarded you? Oh! why have you done this thing, my Princess?"

And Edgiva bent over him, and in her beautiful eyes there were tears also as she bade him rise and come and sit beside her.

But Wulnoth shook his head and answered that might not be, for she was the King's daughter and he but a thrall.

"Now nay, Wulnoth," answered Edgiva. "Even if what thou sayest is true, then it would be mine to command and thine to obey. But this is not so. Thou and I are friends as we were in the dear old days when we were in Lethra —"

"But I angered you, my Princess," he said. "I angered you in the woods when I spoke of Thor." And Edgiva looked grave.

"Nay, not angered, Wulnoth," she said gently. "I was grieved, but I knew it would all come right in the

end. Now, Wulnoth, tell me, for we have but little time, and perchance we may not meet again yet —"

"Not meet!" he cried. "Oh, my Princess, thou wilt not send me away again!"

"Wulnoth, thou hast thy work, and I have mine," she answered, "and we must fulfil our tasks. Now listen then to my words. Thou hast longed to find me again?"

"I have longed to find you, O Princess," he answered. "For I am thy watcher."

"And only because thou art my watcher?" she answered softly, and he made no reply.

"Canst thou not answer my question, Wulnoth?" she asked again. "Hast thou longed to find me only because thou art my watcher?"

And then he looked up, and his strong face was full of light, yet his voice was full of pain, and he said —

"Oh, my Princess, that is the first cruel thing that thou hast done to me, for why wilt thou have me tell my heart's story to thee, seeing that thou art so far away from me? Yet if thou wilt have it so, it shall be. I have longed for thee, Edgiva, because I love thee — because not a maiden in the world has moved my heart as thou hast done; because in my dreams thou hast smiled upon me. I love thee, Princess — I who am thrall and thy watcher — and now that the matter is told, send for thy servants and have me cast out."

And then, while he knelt there with bowed head, one little arm crept round his neck, and a dear, gentle voice spoke in his ear saying —

"Oh, thou great, strong, hero-hearted, foolish Wulnoth! Had it been my wish to cast thee forth, dost thou think I had let thee see me, or speak such words as thou hast now done? Wulnoth, they are heart music to me. Thou foolish Wulnoth, to be jealous as thou wast in the forest! Thou loyal Wulnoth, to resist the temptation wherewith Wyborga tempted thee to tarry there with me! Kiss me, Wulnoth, my great bear of a lover, for truly thou art as big and as strong and as shaggy as a bear, but thou art my love, and no other love have I had, save my Lord Whom I serve."

Then all music came into Wulnoth's soul, for he knew that Edgiva loved him, and he felt that nothing else mattered in this world now, and he asked her how it was since she loved him that she had fled away from him in the past.

"Canst thou not see, Wulnoth?" Edgiva answered. "It was because I loved thee. But I had learnt to love the Lord, and thou didst know nothing of Him, and hadst thou made me thy wife then, I should have followed thee and have forgotten my Lord."

"Yet I am not a Christian now, Edgiva," he said. "And not even to win thee would I call myself one unless I could do so honestly."

"I know that, Wulnoth," she answered. "But the time will come when thou dost understand. Tell me, dost thou still think the Lord a nithing, and His worship fit only for weaklings?" And at that Wulnoth shook his head.

"Princess," he said, "I am like a man who walks

in a wood having lost his way, or like those who are caught by the sea fog off a rocky shore. I know not what to think. For of a truth it seems strange for strong men to suffer wrong when they have swords by their sides; and yet I have seen the King die, and — it was more than I could fathom; and I have looked at the image in the church yonder — the image on the cross, and it seemed to speak to me. I know not what to think."

"And hast thou found the mightiest leader yet, Wulnoth?" she asked. And he shook his head again.

"Nay, Princess. I sought old Regner Lodbrok, for he was called the mightiest, but he died here in this land, and thus it is that I come to be with those who are doubly mine enemies, seeing that they are Danes, and those who ruined Lethra's kingdom —"

"So Wyborga told me that you would," Edgiva said. "She is wise and can prophesy, and it was she who foresaw your coming, and that the Prince should meet you in the forest. It was she who said that you should be in the church to-night, and it was she who said that I might see you. And, Wulnoth, if you have longed to see me, I also have longed for you, and comforted my heart that we should meet again."

"But oh, my love," he answered, "thou art beautiful and a king's daughter, and I am —"

"Of the Royal House of Cerdic — of the same stock as the King of the West Saxons. Thou must do mighty deeds for me, Wulnoth, and earn me a name, and then I shall be proud of thee."

"But how can I, Princess? I am of the Danes now. I must leave them and come to my own people —"

"Nay, Wulnoth. Wyborga told me of this thing. She said that thou shouldst not do that, for the parting with Hungwar and his brother would come without seeking it in that fashion. Go back to the camp and wait; and now know, Wulnoth, that I do love thee, and that I shall love none other. Yet we cannot be more than friends until thou hast finished thy quest —"

"And found Guthred?" he asked.

"Nay, but found the mightiest, and the bravest, and the grandest amongst men," she answered.

"Dost thou know, Edgiva, that it hath been told to me that Hungwar still remembers thee, and that he would fain find thee?" Wulnoth asked. And she smiled.

"Ay, I know that, Wulnoth," she answered; "and indeed I should be afraid, but that I know thou wilt be near me now, and while thou art nigh, I fear not Hungwar."

Then they were silent, standing side by side, hand in hand, and love in their hearts. And it was peace time in their souls, when all the world seemed fair, and when all nature was singing, just as it had done in the past when, as children, they wandered with Guthred in the flower-laden fields, or the shady groves of Lethra. And Edgiva lifted her face to him and smiled, and her eyes spoke words that her lips uttered not; and Wulnoth bent and kissed her, and in that kiss their souls seemed joined, so that none might come between them forever.

Then did Wyborga come and bid Wulnoth join his friend again, for the way was long, and the hours were fleeing; and Wulnoth came and Edgiva with him; and when Wahrmund saw the Princess, he stared open-mouthed, and he cried —

"Thora, beloved of Regner, the son of Sigurd, was called the most beautiful of women; but here is one more beautiful. Not Freya herself is more fair than thou art, Princess."

"Thou art a flatterer, Dane," laughed Alfred the Atheling; but Wahrmund answered —

"Not so, Prince. I speak what I think; and I counsel thee, if counsel I may, to keep this pearl from the sight of Hungwar and his friends; for surely they would burn this land into gray ash to secure such a treasure."

"Methinks our royal sister looks far more gay than she has done for many a day, brother," said the King with a smile. And Edgiva answered steadily, and with never a blush —

"That is true, royal Ethelred, for I have found again my hero." And at that the King laughed again.

Then did the Atheling turn to Wulnoth and ask him of his search after the mightiest, and where he would now look, seeing that Regner Lodbrok was dead; and Wulnoth answered that he knew not where to look now, unless he went afar to Rome and sought the Emperor.

"Now, Wulnoth," the Atheling said, "let me be thy redesman in this. Thou didst think that Regner Lodbrok was the mightiest warrior?"

"Then, by my beard, he was not far out," cried Wahrmund. And the Prince smiled.

"So! Yet this Regner is dead, and there is no king but must die in the end."

"That is true, Prince," Wulnoth said; and Wahrmund nodded.

"Then death is mightier than the mightiest," said Alfred. And Wulnoth looked puzzled.

"Does that mean we should follow death, Prince?" he said. "By my word, we soldiers do that all our lives, methinks."

"Nay, Wulnoth. 'T is true we follow death, for 't is our call; but there is one mightier than death even."

"Mightier than death!" cried Wahrmund. "That is hard saying, Prince; for what, or who, is mightier than death?" And to that the Prince answered —

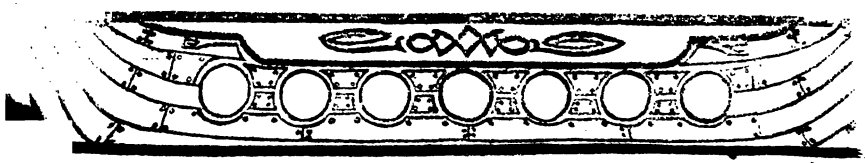
"Life is mightier than death. Do not thy own sagas tell thee that the heroes live again in Walhalla, and that they perish no more?"

"Ay," answered Wahrmund. "Though whether it be true or not, I cannot say."

"Wulnoth," the Prince went on, "thou didst see the image of Him Who hung on the cross? He Whom thou didst once call nithing, I hear."

"I have seen, Prince," Wulnoth answered.

"Then know He is the Lord of Life; and to conquer death He died, and He rose again. Death and He went holmgang, and He conquered. He is the mightiest, and by Him shall we drive out our foes and conquer Thor and his followers."



"Do not be too sure of that, Prince," growled Wahrmund, not liking to hear his people spoken of so; but the Prince went on —

"Nay, I mean not to offend you, brave soldier. I only speak what I feel. Have you not told me that you wondered to see how King Edmund braved the worst torture and pain?"

"That is so," the Dane answered. And once more the Prince went on —

"And how did he do this? He was strengthened by the Lord; and He Who had suffered succored him in his suffering. Now, it is to Him that you must turn. But now," he added, "the morning draws near, and you two must be back at the camp ere day breaks; so let us bid each other farewell, and perchance we may meet again."

So they clasped each other's hands, the Saxons and the Dane; and Edgiva smiled on Wulnoth, and whispered her love-parting; and then he and Wahrmund set out, guided by him who had brought them, until they reached the forest.

And when at last they were alone, the Dane stopped and stroked his beard, and he said slowly —

"Comrade, we two have seen strange things to-night, and heard strange things, too. But beware how you speak of them to me where other ears may listen; for there are three things which Hungwar would be glad to have."

"What are they, Wahrmund?" asked Wulnoth carelessly; for he was so happy that he cared little for Hungwar and his wants.

"Wanderer, the son of Regner would like the gold from yon Christian altar; and he would like to have that Atheling in his power; and he would like to have the Lady Edgiva also."

"He shall have my axe ere he has one of the three," said Wulnoth; and the Dane laughed grimly.

"Bold words! But the son of Regner is no nithing nor weakling; and he has some warriors around him, Wanderer. Thou mayst be strong, but thou art not strong enough for that; therefore, I warn thee be discreet and hold thy tongue."

Now, this is how Wulnoth found his Princess, and how the love tale was spoken, and this is how Alfred the Atheling told Wulnoth of the Mightiest and the Bravest of Lords.

CHAPTER XIV

How Wahrmund the Dane gave his Life for Wulnoth

NOW, though Hungwar the Dane had evil thoughts respecting Wulnoth and Wahrmund, he held his peace and kept his own counsel at the first; and in the morning, when the two were in the hall, he greeted them with a dark smile, and he said —

"Greeting, Wulnoth, and greeting, Wahrmund. You are cunning warriors; for while we have been feasting and drinking and listening to the songs of the scalds, we have missed your faces; and methinks, surely, that ye have been spying out the land, and seeing where the foe hide."

"We have been wandering, O chief," answered Wulnoth. And Hungwar laughed loudly.

"What should the Wanderer do but wander?" he cried. "Thou art not content with doing the deeds of ordinary men, thou rider on sea monsters and thou

doer of great deeds. But take care, lest one day thou do a deed too many, and a little thing, like a spear or a sword, make thy strength become weakness."

"Death comes to all in time, O chief," Wulnoth answered; and again Hungwar laughed.

"True, O Wanderer; yet sometimes he comes to some sooner than to others — and there are other ways of dying than by the man's tools."

"Look you, Wanderer," growled Wahrmund, when the two were alone, "we are in an evil case, we two; for Hungwar suspects, and when he is suspicious he puts an end to doubts with the sword or the axe. We are surely in an evil case, Wanderer."

And to that Wulnoth answered —

"It may be as thou sayest, Wahrmund, for this son of Regner is to my mind more of a nithing than a hero."

"That is but partly true," answered Wahrmund, jealous for the honor of his chief. "True, he is cruel and merciless, but when it comes to playing the man's game, where the blows are the hardest and the sword sings the loudest, there, be sure, will Hungwar be found. Still, we are in an evil case, and I see not how to advise thee. My rede is that thou flee at once, lest evil befall thee."

"I flee not," answered Wulnoth; "I am no nithing. Edgiva told me that Wyborga, who is a wise woman and a prophetess, declared that I should abide here until I received a sign, and I see no sign yet."

"To my mind," answered Wahrmund, "Hungwar's

words are sign enough for any man, and you will be wise to take them."

"Do you flee with me?" Wulnoth asked. And the Dane swore a mighty oath by Thor that he would not.

"I have followed Regner Lodbrok since I was a boy," he said, "and I will follow his son, unless he attempts my life or does a shame deed to me. If that day comes, then I will fight my last fight with back to wall, and some shall go with me to Walhalla."

"Then if thou dost not flee, I do not flee," answered Wulnoth, and there the matter ended for the time.

Yet Wulnoth had much to think of; and the more he thought, the more he felt that the gods of the North were false gods, and that the God of Christians was the true God; and that it was by bearing that conquest came. And yet that puzzled him, for he felt that a warrior should war; and he knew that if Hungwar tried to do him harm, then he should fight and make his big sword sing a good song ere he was vanquished.

And more than once did his friend urge him to escape, saying that he was sure that Hungwar thought evil against him, and would seek soon to do him harm; but to all the pleading, Wulnoth answered that while Wahrmund stayed, he would stay also.

Yet Hungwar did plot evil against Wulnoth, and in a cunning way. He knew that the Wanderer looked with anger upon the killing of King Edmund, and he thought to have that done which should make Wulnoth speak rashly, and so bring him into his power; and thus it is that he did it. One of the bands of Danes which

had roamed the country brought tidings of a village hidden away amidst the marshes, where old people and women and little children dwelt; and the chiefs, in cruel sport, said that they would go against this village themselves, and teach the churls the way to the storm-land; and Hungwar called upon Wulnoth and Wahrmund to be of his party.

Now, Wulnoth was troubled at this, and yet he knew not how to escape the going; and he comforted himself by thinking that when the sword sang and the red flames danced, then he might be able to save some of the poor victims and aid them to escape.

So the Danes went out on their cruel errand, and the village was surrounded, and the houses given to the fire; and the people were collected and brought into the midst of the Danes.

And then Hungwar and Hubba, raging like wolves, ordered the men to be tortured, and the women to be burnt, and the children and the maidens to be put to death by the warriors; and Wulnoth felt a great anger coming into his heart, and his blood began to tingle as it beat through his veins, and the spirit of the berserker came upon him; and at last he could stand idle no longer; and just then Hungwar called to him and mocked him, saying —

"Ah, Wanderer, thou art a sluggard. Thy sword has had no drink, and thy axe is dry. To work, Wanderer, to work, and join our sport."

"Patience, Hungwar," answered Wulnoth grimly. "Sword and axe shall have their fill. This murdering

of prisoners is a nithing's game, fit only for such dogs as thou and thy companions. This is better sport for me." And with that he struck a mighty blow with his fist at one viking who had speared a little child; and, though he hit but with his fist, the man dropped dead.

"Thou dog!" roared Hungwar. "Dost thou dare to speak so to me? I will have thy tongue cut out for this insolence."

"Come and do it thyself, Dane," answered Wulnoth. "Or shall I come to thee?" and he strode towards the chief.

But men ran between them, and a score of weapons were raised against him, and many voices cried out that he should die.

"Now this is a man's game," he laughed. "Pity 't is that Hungwar will not play in it"; and he swung his axe high, and made it play like a circle of fire around his head, and wherever that axe fell there fell a viking of Denmark.

"Do not slay him. Take him alive," cried Hungwar, keeping out of reach of danger himself. "And take Wahrmund also, for he is a traitor, and the two know of the treasure of the Saxons and where the West Saxon King is. Take them alive, and the torture shall make them cry for mercy."

"Now, by Thor!" growled Wahrmund, when he heard that, "for forty years have I warred for Denmark and followed thy house, O Hungwar; and I looked to go to the storm-land doing so. But thou takest me not prisoner, and thou puttest me not to torture. And

now I tell thee, as the Wanderer has told thee, that thou art a nithing and a coward, and more fit to lead ravening wolves than to direct heroes. Come thou hither and take me, thou coward."

But Hungwar only answered — "Take them alive. Do them no hurt," and he foamed at the mouth like an angry bear, and shook his fists in the air.

"Now, Wanderer, there is a game to play and a song to be sung," cried Wahrmund, as he reached Wulnoth's side. "Stand thou beside me and let us see what we may do in this case."

So side by side they stood, their faces to the foe; and the Danes circled round them, seeking to find a place for spear thrust or sword stroke. But ever the shields received the blow, and ever the axes answered the stroke, and men fell shorn and gashed, and still the two champions stood unscathed.

And then, when the foe gathered for a greater rush, Wulnoth's strength came, like unto madness; and he rushed forward and caught a warrior in each hand and whirled them round as if they were flails, so that the vikings drew back in horror and fear, for they had never seen men strong like as Wulnoth was.

Then loud the Wanderer laughed, and he cried to his friend —

"'T is a good fight, Wahrmund, comrade, and one worth the fighting. We have slain many. Now shall we make an end and rush upon them, and take this Hungwar with us to the storm-land?"

But Wahrmund answered —

"Hast thou forgotten Edgiva the Beautiful, Wanderer? She will weep for thee, and, moreover, thou mayst yet be needed to watch over her. I see no sense in staying here to be slaughtered. Let us retreat side by side, and since these holdas cast us out, seek the Atheling and lend him our aid."

"Now surely thy words are good words, comrade," Wulnoth answered. "For if this is not the sign for which I waited, then I know not what may be. So shield in front and axe ready, let us step backwards, comrade, and then, if we can reach the forest, all may be well."

Then the two heroes began to step backwards, still facing their enemy, and around them swarmed the host of the foe, pressing hard and sore, until at last Wahrmund cried to Wulnoth that they should run.

"No scald can say we are nithing or weak," he said, "for we have fought a good fight. But fain would I see thee live, Wulnoth, since that is thy real name, for I see thou hast a word to say to Hungwar yet. As for me, I know this is my last fight, for I am sore wounded —"

"Say not 't is thy last fight, comrade," cried Wulnoth. "If thou dost tarry, then I tarry with thee."

"Think thou of Edgiva," said Wahrmund. And Wulnoth answered —

"I do think of her. I think I should be shamed to look her in the face and say I deserted a wounded comrade."

"I wish thee to live that thou mayst avenge me,"

Wahrmund said. But all that Wulnoth would answer was —

"I will avenge thee, ere I die by thy side."

Now, Wahrmund perceived that Wulnoth had the berserker spirit upon him, and that he was as one mad, who would listen to no reason; and yet he was minded to save him for the sake of Edgiva the Beautiful, so he said —

"Now come, then, and run, for nigh this spot is a deep ravine, the which is crossed by a single plank, and if we gain that, we can there hold our own and make a good fight."

"So be it," replied Wulnoth, and together they ran, though Wahrmund was sore in pain and wounded deeply, and soon the bridge was in sight.

It was but a log laid across a cleft in the earth, and the cleft was so wide that no man might hope to leap it, and so deep that it was death to try to descend its sides, and the trunk was but laid on the earth.

"Cross thou first, Wulnoth," gasped Wahrmund. "Cross, and hold the other end steady, for it rests on a stone, and I fear I should fall if I tried to walk over first."

The Danes were now hard upon them, and to the soldiers were joined many chiefs of fame, all full of fury at the deed that had been done.

Wulnoth, thinking nothing of what was in his friend's heart, rushed across and turned to hold the log steady, but Wahrmund stopped at his end and he seized the log with both hands and hurled it down

into the chasm so that none might pass to Wulnoth, and he could not return to them.

"What hast thou done, Wahrmund, my friend?" cried Wulnoth in despair, but Wahrmund smiled and waved his hand.

"Flee thou, comrade," he answered. "I did this on purpose, for I knew thou wouldst not leave me, and I am minded that thou shalt escape. Wulnoth, the death shadow is upon me, and when that is so men see far ahead. I tell thee, thou son of Cerdic, that thou hast a big work to do, and thou must live; while as for me, my work is done, and I go to the storm-land."

"Oh, skoal to thee, thou hero!" cried Wulnoth. "Would that I might cross again and stand by thy side!"

"That thou canst not do," answered Wahrmund; and then he turned, standing with his back to the chasm and his shield advanced, and thus he met the rush of the foe, and made his axe sing a good song and bite deeply ere he fell himself.

And Wulnoth stood on the farther bank and watched the fight, and he cried aloud in his grief and called upon the Danes to fight fairly.

"Oh, nithings!" he cried. "Oh, slayers of little children and weaklings, is there not a man amongst you now? Does no hero soul dwell in Denmark? Not so would Regner Lodbrok have dealt with a brave man. Oh, cowards and nithings that you are, would I were with my friend, to stand by his side!"

But little did the Danes heed his cries. They

pressed upon brave Wahrmund, seeking to take him alive. He was bleeding from a score of wounds, and his strength was all gone.

He tried to cast himself into the chasm, but they laid hands upon him, seeking to drag him away; and he turned his face towards Wulnoth, and cried to him —

"A boon, comrade — a boon for friendship's sake! Thou hast thy spear. A cast, comrade — a good, true cast, right between the shoulders. Better death from a comrade's spear than torture by Hungwar."

Then, as he made an end of speaking, he turned back to the foe, gripping them and holding them at arm's length, planting his feet firmly and standing with his back towards Wulnoth.

And Wulnoth understood, and he raised his spear.

"Skoal to thee, hero amongst men," he cried. "Art ready?" and Wahrmund panted —

"Skoal and farewell. I am ready, comrade."

Then, straight and true flew Wulnoth's spear, and it smote Wahrmund right between the shoulders and stood out a hand's breadth in front, and the old viking fell, dragging two of his foes with him down into the chasm into which he had cast the log.

Then did Wulnoth stand on the other bank, and some cast their spears, but he caught them on his shield, and he cried to Hungwar and said —

"Listen to me, thou nithing, thou wolf that eats up little children, thou fearer of grown men. There is a mark on thy cheek, and I put it there — I, when only a boy; and had it not been for this man whom thou

hast watched die, I had surely made an end of thee on that day with my broken weapon. I am Wulnoth, son of Cerdic, thou Danish nithing, and of a surety one day thou and I shall meet again, and then shall a deed be done and a word said between us twain, Hungwar, son of Regner; and until then, farewell." And with that Wulnoth turned and plunged into the woodlands, and the Danes returned to their camp.

Now, this is how Wahrmund the Dane gave his life to save his friend, and this is how Wulnoth the Wanderer made himself known to Hungwar, the son of Regner Lodbrok.

CHAPTER XV

How Wulnoth came to Alfred

NOW, on through the forest pressed Wulnoth, and his heart was heavy within him because of the dying of Wahrmund his friend, and he thought to himself that now he would seek the West Saxons and fight for them, and that this would be right, seeing that he also was Saxon.

"This Hungwar has cast me out," he mused, "so none may say that I am false in the doing of this; for a man must side with some, and since it cannot be with Hungwar it must be against him."

And then he thought that all this must be fixed from of old, and he laughed.

"No cause have I to love these black Danes," he said, "and no cause to love the sons of Regner Lodbrok. I will seek this Alfred, and perchance I may find him mightier than Hungwar, and so my rede will be read."

But then he thought that Alfred himself had said that the White Christ was the mightiest of all, and at that he frowned. Not yet did Wulnoth feel any love for that Lord, and he was too honest to pretend to a faith which he did not possess — not even for Edgiva would he do that.

"A man's word is as a man's honor," he said, "and a man's honor should be as a man's life. I will not tell my Princess that I love her Lord until I can feel that He is my Lord indeed."

"Then there you are foolish, Wanderer," said a mocking voice in his ear, and he turned, his hand on his sword, to see beside him that strange being so like himself, who had taken his name and fought with him in the past days.

"You here!" he cried sternly. "Have I not bidden thee leave me and trouble me no more?"

"As well bid your shadow leave you, Wanderer," was the answer he received. "Said I not to you that I would be with you — that I would be your servant? Now you have been foolish, and much trouble has come from it. Of old you might have possessed this Princess, and now you may do so — for what matters it what faith you profess, seeing that they all are equally vain. Go to this Alfred, declare you are a Christian, marry the Princess, and all will be well."

"Thou tempter, so like myself that thou seemest my very double!" cried Wulnoth. "I will not listen to such base words."

"Base words! Foolish thought! Does not the

wise man get that which he covets in the easiest way? Still, if thou art so tender in thy conscience, I will tell thee another way — a way like unto that which heroes have practised from of old."

"What is thy way?" asked Wulnoth suspiciously, for he liked not this man's counsel. And the other answered —

"This is my way, Wanderer, and 't is counsel fit for hero to hear. As thou goest on thy road thou shalt find a band of masterless men, good fighters every one. Now make thyself leader of these, and be no man to Saxon or Dane. There is land to be won by strong hand and keen sword, and thou canst carry off thy Princess, as many a jarl has carried off his wife."

"Now, out on thee for a base churl!" cried Wulnoth angrily. "What! I carry off my Princess? By Thor, we fight again for that!"

"And, by Thor, I will win thee," laughed the other. "For here we have no light to throw crosses on the ground. 'T is my time, and my hour, and I will conquer, and thou shalt carry off the Princess as I have said."

So there again these two fought, as they had fought so often before, and now the stranger seemed much the stronger, strong though Wulnoth was, and he laughed aloud, and cried —

"O Wanderer, thou hast denied the White Christ and called Him nithing, and His sign shall not help thee now."

"Who art thou who hast my name and my form?"

gasped Wulnoth hoarsely. "Who art thou who thus seekest to war with me though I have beaten thee before? This time I will kill thee."

"Nay, that thou wilt not. Because thou hast beaten me, therefore fight I still. When I have conquered, then we will be at peace. As for who I am, I have told thee that I am Wulnoth, son of Cerdic, and if thou art also Wulnoth, then we are one, and Wulnoth is Wulnoth's foe. So read my riddle if thou canst — and now I have conquered."

And with that the stranger threw Wulnoth and rested on him, one knee on his chest and one hand at his throat, and his dagger gleamed high in the air.

But Wulnoth stretched out his hand and gripped his sword, which he had let slip. And lo, he picked it up blindly and held it aloft, and it was hilt up, and the hilt was crossed after the manner of a champion's weapon.

"'T is the White Christ's sign!" he gasped, as his eyes fell upon it; and as he spoke his strength seemed to return, and he flung the stranger from him and rose joyfully, and the stranger fled away into the darkness, crying as he fled, "Lost! Lost! Lost!"

"This sign is a wonderful sign," thought Wulnoth. "I must think more of it, for how can the White Christ be so weak if His sign is so powerful? I must truly think more of this."

Now, for a night and a day did Wulnoth wander, seeking to find the way to the lake and the island whereon was the church where the dead King was

buried, but he searched in vain and his heart grew weary.

It was a dreadful country in which he found himself — flat and broken with many a stream, and marshy, so that the feet sank in ooze, and at night white mists rose, like ghosts from the fens, and encircled all things, and chilled him to the bone; yet still he pushed on, seeing only ruins and the handwork of the Danes. And so he journeyed until he came to better land, where he found people.

But none could tell him of the island with its church, or if they could, they would not, for all looked upon him with suspicion, and many cursed him for a Northland haco and bade him begone, lest he find his death-sleep through tarrying.

Sometimes Wulnoth felt angry at this, but he thought of the hard things these people had suffered, and that it was but natural they should view him with distrust, and so he went his way.

Yet not all spoke so; some were kindly and gave him shelter, but none could tell him of the King of the West Saxons beyond saying that they had heard how he and the Atheling had travelled swiftly back into their kingdom of Wessex. So on Wulnoth pushed, asking his way, for since he could not find Edgiva, the next best thing to do was to find Alfred.

And in a dense wood he came, as the stranger had said he would, upon a band of masterless men seated around a fire; and they started up and asked him who he was, and demanded his money, at which Wulnoth laughed.

"Why, friends," he said, "if you never get richer than I shall make you, you will stay poor, for of money have I none, who am but a wanderer — a nameless and a landless man."

"Then thou art as a brother to us," the others said; "and come thou and join us, for thou dost look a likely man, Wanderer."

Then the Wanderer sat down by their fire, and he looked upon their bold, rugged faces and saw that they were men hardened in war, and fighters each and all, and he said —

"Fain would I join you if you would join me." And at that they asked him what his words might mean.

"This do I mean," he answered calmly. "There are strangers in this land playing your game, and playing it better than ye can. The Black Strangers give the land to fire and sword so that the flames run from east to west, until they slack their thirst in the farther waters; and the heart of this people is weak as water. Men are wanted — fighters — and, methinks, to stay here and harry those who are harried, and rob those who are robbed, is but a nithing's game, and with no glory in it. I go to find the King of Saxons, and offer my sword to him. Come ye with me and be men, and strike for your land instead of warring against it."

And then did he tell them of the cruel works of the Danes, until they started up and said that it was a good word which he had spoken, and that they would go forth with him and offer their swords to the King.

"But where is the King?" one asked; and another answered —

"He tarries nigh Welandes Smithan, with Osburga, his lady mother; and there, close to the White Horse, shall we find him." [1]

"Then let us go forward at once," cried the rest. "Only we go not nigh Welandes Smithan by night, for 't is an evil spot and haunted by night-hags and ghosts. Long should I walk, if I had to wait for riding until the elf smith shod my horse."

"Who, then, is this Wieland, that ye fear?" asked Wulnoth, curiously; and the robbers answered that none knew, that none ever saw him, but that if any man went to his forge, which was only a number of mighty stones set on the bleak moor, and placed a piece of money on one stone and tied his horse to another, and then went his way, that when he returned, if he had been faithful and had not sought to pry, there the horse would be shod, and the money gone, though never a man could there be seen in the place.

"The good Lord shield us from all such wizardry," cried one robber; and Wulnoth stared at that. "The

[1] King Alfred was born at Wantage, not far from the White Horse of Berkshire. The White Horse itself, cut in the chalk, was probably the work of the early Jutes under Hengist and Horsa, which names, by the way, signify a horse and a mare. The white horse was the ensign of the Old Saxons; and hence it is, to this day, found upon the shield of Brunswick and Hanover. There exists near Wantage, the remains of the ancient *long barrow* or burying place, called Weyland Smith's forge, celebrated by Sir Walter Scott in his novel of "Kenilworth." It owes its name to the old Norse deity, *Volundr*, who was the blacksmith of their mythology, as Vulcan was amongst the Greeks and Romans.

good Lord!" Then these robbers held that the White Christ was greater than the wizards and night-hags and the ghost smith of Wieland's forge!

"Where tarries the King himself?" he asked. "Surely 't is he whom we should seek, and not the Atheling."

"The King is gone to his house at Winchester, I hear, there to take counsel with his thanes and ealdormen in the Witenagemot. For, mark you this, Wanderer — if these black strangers come into our good Wessex, they will find us fiercer fighters than were those of East Anglia."

"Ay, that is your fault," said Wulnoth. And the robbers looked surprised.

"Our fault? What — that we fight well?"

"Now, nay," answered Wulnoth, with a smile, "for that is no fault, but that ye are so divided amongst yourselves into East and West Saxons, and men of Mercia and Northumbria. These Danes come as one, and they come like clouds of flies, and they will eat up one place at a time, when, if ye were all bound together, they could not stand before you. There will be hard work before us before we drive them out, and there will be hero deeds and death-songs for many a one."

"And what could man want better?" laughed the robbers. "Come, let us march, and — the best song for the best man."

So Wulnoth, instead of being alone, now found himself with fifty good fighters, and though he was not

their captain, they were going at his advice, and that was something.

For six days they marched on, mostly by night, and through the wild lands; for, as the robbers said, they were nameless men, and if any ealdorman or thane heard of their presence near his hold, he might sally out and make an end of them for being robbers, and hang their leaders on the nearest trees, without waiting to hear of what they were thinking of doing.

"Not but what they make us what we are, oft-times," growled the captain. "For, look you, I am a Sethcundman. For four generations, father and son, we held our five hydes, and each hyde of a hundred good acres; and if that does not make us Sethcundmen and gentle, then what does? Yet down on our land came Seward, son of Beorn,[1] son of the bear, and he seized our holdings and drove us out. What wonder that we reply by robbing, since we have been robbed? Look at Sigwad yonder — he could not pay the tax when the King's house-carls called for it; and lo, they sold all he had, and his wife died on the wayside. Thus do we, who are of the people, grow discontented, and meet violence with violence, giving blow for blow."

"But while the rich oppress you, you oppress the poor, your brethren," answered Wulnoth; "and that is but a poor thing in my eyes. But perchance now, if we do our part in this business, those who are great

[1] Seward, son of Beorn earl of Northumbria. Tradition said that Beorn's father was a bear in the forests of Norway; and that beneath Beorn's shaggy locks the long ears of a bear were hidden from view.

will see that those who are beneath them are men. Why, yonder black strangers would not hold together a month if the chiefs looked down on the warriors. But hark, methought I heard the sound of a horn in the woods yonder. What may that be?"

"Some following the hunt, most like," came the answer; "yet we will wait awhile and see what goes forward."

So amongst the bushes they sank down; for there was nothing to be gained in going forward, if that meant going to struggle with their own countrymen; and Wulnoth, accompanied by the captain, went on to spy out the peril ahead.

On through the glades they went; and presently they came to one wherein they saw a great boar, a waster of the woods, standing savagely at bay, the while two gallant hounds stood before it.

Brave dogs were they; but one was sorely ripped by those gleaming tusks, and the other stood over him, barking defiance.

"An unequal fight!" cried Wulnoth, lifting his spear. But the robber caught his hand.

"Thou fool!" he said. "Most like some great thane hunts the boar, and do you think he would thank you for slaying it? Wait. See, here he comes."

A young man sprang into the glade, cheering on his dog, but the boar broke upon the hound and tore it, and then came towards the man, who awaited it, spear in hand.

"Why!" cried the robber — "see, 't is the Atheling,

and his sickness is upon him. See, see — the boar has him now, for sure."

And Wulnoth, looking, saw the Prince place his hand to his head and stagger, as one who has been too long at the ale horn; the point of his spear dropped, he made an effort to recover himself, and then he fell to the earth, right in the track of the waster!

"He is dead now!" cried the robber. "That brute will have the hope of the West Saxons, and nothing can hinder it."

"That we will see!" answered Wulnoth, and he made a cast, a mighty cast, such as, of old, Osth the giant had taught him to throw; and his spear sang, and smote that foaming, ravening monster full in the flank, and passed on and split his grim, savage heart in twain; and the waster fell, its great snout just reaching to the senseless man's breast.

"By Thor, a good cast," cried Wulnoth, drawing his knife and leaping forward. "Follow me, friend, and let us make sure the brute is dead."

They ran to the spot, and they saw at a glance there was nothing to fear from the boar; so they knelt over the Atheling and raised his head and loosened his tunic, when a band rushed forward with fierce shouts and seized them, crying out that they were robbers who had slain the Atheling.

"Little need to have slain your Prince," laughed Wulnoth, pointing to the boar. "Yon beast would have done it soon enough had it not been for my spear." And at that the men stopped and looked, and said that

it was not the spear of the Prince that stood out from the boar's side.

"See! he opens his eyes. Now shall we know the truth," one man cried. And the word was true — the Atheling sighed and raised himself, looking round in bewilderment.

"Good friends! How comes it that I am unharmed?" he said. "I fell as the boar rushed at me. Who saved me, and who are these men whom ye hold?"

"Greeting, Prince," said Wulnoth. "It was I who saved you; and these hold us because they think we are robbers who have done you harm."

"What — Wanderer!" cried the Prince, with a kindly smile. "No robber thou; and so thou hast saved me. But," he added, and his face grew stern, "thy companion is a nameless man, for I know his face."

"True, O Prince, and a nameless man wants a name, methinks. I met this companion and his merry lads, and together we have journeyed to see thee; for there are fifty strong arms waiting to draw sword, and they had better be for thee than against thee, methinks."

"Is this so?" asked the Prince, turning to the robber. "Do you truly desire to fight as honest men should, against our foes?" and the robber bowed his head, and replied —

"It is even so, Atheling of the West Saxons. When foes carry fire and sword, ill it becomes the children of the land to do so also."

"Spoken like a man," cried the Prince. "Go and call thy men hither, and we will see that there is work

enough for each and all. And for thee, Wanderer" — and the Prince turned to Wulnoth — "good is the gift thou hast given me, and good the service thou hast done me; so come thou, and let us talk, and receive thou the thanks of the Lady Osburga, my mother." And, thus saying, Prince Alfred took Wulnoth's arm and led him away.

Now, this is how Wulnoth met the masterless men, and how he saved the life of Alfred, the Atheling of the West Saxons.

CHAPTER XVI

How the Men of Wessex fought the Danes

RIGHT heartily did Alfred welcome Wulnoth after he had heard his story, and warm were the words of praise which he spoke of Wahrmund the Dane; and of him he said these words —

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend." And when Wulnoth heard that he answered —

"Now, that is a true word and a wise, O Prince. What great scald or redesman uttered that?"

"The greatest Scald and the greatest Redesman that ever this world saw, O friend," answered the Prince. "That is one of the sayings of the Lord Jesus."

"Now," said Wulnoth, "I cannot understand, but everything good and true seems to come from Him —"

"Whom thou thinkest a nithing, O friend," answered the Atheling. And Wulnoth was silenced.

And with the Atheling there tarried his mother

Osburga, the wife of the noble Ethelwulf — a gracious lady, so full of sympathy and wisdom, with mild, beautiful eyes that yet had a light in them as of a sorrow never forgotten; for grief had been hers, though she was a king's wife and the mother of kings.

Here also was Asser, the writer, and Alfred's bosom friend, and Ealdorman Ethelred, and Osric, both mighty warriors and great heroes, and with them Abbot Hugoline, and Bishop Eadred; and these wise ones talked much of holy things, and Wulnoth listened and learnt much, and asked many questions.

And best of all, while he tarried with the Prince there came Wyborga and Edgiva, together with holy women from the church on the island, saying that they had fled because the Danes were moving and pressing forward into Wessex, carrying fire and sword with them.

Sweet were the moments which Wulnoth spent with his Princess, yet brief were they, for there was much work to do, and he and his companions, the fifty nameless men, were busy marching hither and thither, and calling on all the men in the place to take their arms and gather at the King's command beneath the banner of the Atheling.

Every day there were martial exercises, and those who were least skilled with the bow or at casting the spear had to work from morning until night; for, as Alfred said to them, "They needed to be men who could slay — not men who were ready to be slain only."

Now between the Atheling and all his soldiers,

even to the lowest, was there friendship, and not one but could be sure of being received and listened to did he wish to speak to his Prince. And each day more and more men came in, and the forces under the Prince's command grew larger.

But one day did Alfred speak with Wulnoth, and he said to him —

"Wanderer, not only brave men and skilled warriors do we need to defeat these Danes. We need what they have, and what our fathers on the other side of the sea had — good ships, stout ships, long ships that can match the best of theirs. Upon the sea must we learn to meet them and so keep the fire from our land."

"Why indeed, Prince, that is the very word which my comrade Wahrmund spake to me upon the day on which we first sighted these shores — 'Not till they learn to fight us upon the sea shall they hope to beat us.'"

"He spoke a true word," replied the Prince thoughtfully, "and if God spare me I will see that this England of ours has such ships — the best that can be built. I will see that since the seas wash our shores, of those seas shall she reign mistress."

Such was Alfred's vow, and afterwards, when he was king, in face of such difficulties as might have well appalled the stoutest heart, he kept his word and built his ships, and beat the Danes at their own game upon the deep waters.

But that is not for now — now we have to tell how that first battle was waged against the Black Strangers,

in which they were to learn that there were other swords as sharp as their own and other hearts as brave.

For messenger came after messenger, speeding to Alfred and saying that unless he advanced to meet the foe they would penetrate to Winchester itself, where the King's house was. So Alfred sent messages to the King, urging him to come and lead the battle in person lest the glory should be taken from him. For Alfred, though he was wiser and braver than his elder brother, never forgot that brother was his king, and in all things he honored him and gave him willing service.

So King Ethelred marched, and all his host with him, and they joined forces with the Atheling where he tarried; and the Lady Osburga, and Elswitha, Alfred's wife, and the Lady Edgiva, and all their train, retired with a small guard towards Winchester, for though they were brave enough to face the perils of war, their presence would have but hindered the army, and given increased cause for care to its leaders.

Sad was the parting, and yet joyful, for these brave Saxon ladies cheered the warriors and urged them to great deeds, and sang to them songs of how they were going to free their dear England from the power of the oppressor. And then, with many prayers and with smiling lips and tearful eyes, they parted and went their way, while the King and the Atheling caused their banners to be displayed and marched to the eastward to meet the Danes under Hungwar and King Bacseg.

For tidings came that Hubba and Biorn Ironbeard,

and others had gone northward; and Guthrun stayed at the old camp, awaiting the return of the ships, for since the matter of Wulnoth and the killing of Wahrmund there had been quarrels amongst the holdas, and they parted one from the other.

Still, it was the main force that was now advancing into Wessex, and many were the chiefs of fame accompanying it.

The Saxon force was nothing like as numerous, but so great was the charm of Alfred that all there held together, forgetting their private quarrels and seeking only each to aid the great business of making the land free once more.

The King had seen Wulnoth and had greeted him well, and though he did look askance at the nameless ones, he was glad of their presence, and he said with a laugh that since Wulnoth had brought them, Wulnoth must be responsible for them; and so, while their own captain led them, Wulnoth was their commander; and because he himself was nameless and landless, the robbers greeted him well and obeyed his wishes, as otherwise they would not have done.

And they marched past the dreaded Welandes Smithan, and the Atheling himself pointed out the spot to Wulnoth and showed him the great flat stone on which the silver penny must be laid, and he said that none could tell by what power the shoeing was done, but that the body of the Wise Wieland lay at rest beneath those stones.

And other strange piles of stones they found on

their march, each of which had some dreadful legend of ghost or elfin power attached to it, but which, in these days, we know to be only the tombs of a strange people long since past away. And so, at last, they came to a place called Ashdune, a wide sweeping plain, with but one single tree in it, and that tree a great straggling thorn bush, growing nigh the centre. And there, on the verge of the plain, they encamped for the night, and on the opposite side they could see the watch fires of the invaders, and count their banners waving to the wind.

Wild were the shouts from the Danish camp that night, for the holdas drank deeply, as was their custom, and they called out the names of their dead heroes, and the songs were sung in their honor by the scalds as the warriors drank to the war game and the sword song, and vowed that with the rising of the sun they would make an end of the men of Wessex, and lay the land low in fire.

Such was the way in which Wulnoth had been wont to spend the night before the battle, but in the camp of the Saxons it was not so. Sparingly the soldiers drank, and the Atheling took nothing but water; and while watch was kept the Abbot Hugoline came amongst the ranks and prayed, and the men knelt and crossed their hands upon their breasts, and the monks sang to Him Whom they called "The Lord God, great and terrible, and mighty in battle"; and that made Wulnoth the more perplexed, for he saw not how the gentle Lord Christ could be terrible in battle.

And then did he see Bishop Eadred all girt in armor, and with a mighty mace in his hand, and thereat he wondered more than ever, for he had not thought to see a priest armed to fight like a warrior.

But the Bishop laughed and said, "Who should fight for the Church but those who are her most loving servants? Who should fight for the sheep against the ravening wolves but those who are set over the flock as shepherds?" And Wulnoth said to himself that this Bishop was a man, and that he saw the service of the White Christ did not make a man become a nithing.

And also he looked at the Prince, and the Atheling looked mighty in his war gear. Usually he looked pale, seeing that he had a sickness which forever kept him in pain; but now all thought of pain was gone, and he laughed right joyously as he looked abroad at the field whereon the battle would be waged, and he said —

"Now, truly, this is a sight for the heart of any warrior, and great deeds will be done to-day, and yonder heathen foe will be valiant. Yet remember, soldiers, that we fight for much — not for life only, but for freedom, for our hearths and families, for our wives, our sisters, our mothers, and daughters. Strike for them a good blow and true, and never let it be said of one 'This man was a nithing.' See yonder" — and he pointed across the plain — "see, there waves the magic banner of Regner Lodbrok — there the raven of Odin flaunts his wings. But here is the sign of the Lord,"

and he pointed to the cross which a priest held, "and we will see which is mightier this day — Odin or our Lord."

"Now," thought Wulnoth, "that is a sign, and we will see, for truly the foe is the greater and should beat us, for there are many holdas of fame there. Well, we may see, and may I come near to Hungwar, Regner's son, this day."

Then did the war-horns blare and shriek, and the armies moved forward. And first the bowmen sent their arrows hissing like hail, and many a barbed shaft bit deeply and drank its fill of the red blood, but the warriors held their shields and caught the arrows thereon, and laughed, and no nithing was found in the ranks of either side.

Then, as they drew nearer, the spears began to hurtle through the air and join the arrows, and the Valkyrs — those grim storm sisters who love the battle-field and who wait to carry the souls of the heroes to the storm-land — gathered, and floated above the field of slaughter, where the thirsty earth already began to turn red as the victims fell.

But this was but the beginning — the game was hardly started — the fierce, mad sport was to come later.

For now, sweeping forward, came ranks of champions armed with axe, with sword, and shield, and they ran to meet each other, and the strokes fell like hail, and the pikes gored like the horns of angry bulls.

Now Wulnoth had schooled his men, and they

drew together in shape like a wedge, with Wulnoth and the captain at the point of it; and so a long line of shields linked each to each, a long line of axes rising and falling, or swinging upwards from beneath, they drove into the heart of the Danish ranks, and then, opening out, swept the vikings into a mass of struggling disordered men, who hardly had room to move and who mixed friend with foe in their fury.

Oh, great were the deeds done that day, and truly did the Atheling behave like a hero in the fight as he led his men, crying encouragement, pressing wherever the game was the hottest, and seeming to be in a score of places at once.

And bravely fought the King, and he singled out the great Danish champion, King Bacseg, and he called to him and said —

"Greeting, King! I would fain talk with thee." And thereat did the Dane laugh and answer —

"Greeting! Blithely will I listen to thy talk."

Then these twain fell to, and they smote each other lusty blows and made their swords sing a loud song; yet the King of Wessex was the mightier in the conflict, and he smote King Bacseg to the ground, and smote yet again, crying —

"Die, thou fell pirate of Denmark! Die, and let this good English soil find thee a resting-place."

Now, this took place nigh to the thorn bush, and there was a rush of the Danes to rescue the body of their dead King, so that King Ethelred was borne backward, and was like to have been slain himself but that

Wulnoth and his fifty came sweeping down, and formed a wall between the King and the foe.

Then thither hastened all the mighty ones of both sides. There stood Bishop Eadred, and his mace dripped with Danish blood; and there stood Ethelred the Ealdorman, and Osric; and there, against them, as the waves rush against the rocks, came the heroes of Denmark. There came Sidroc the elder, and his son; there came Osbern and Frena; there also came Oskettle and Harold, and not one of them but had made his name a terror, and had carried fire and sword to many a fair spot; and now they came raging towards the spot where the body of King Bacseg lay, crying for vengeance against his slayer.

And thither also came Hungwar, foaming like a bear and rolling his angry eyes, and behind him rose the banner of Regner. And when Wulnoth saw him he cried aloud —

"Ho, tarry, thou Danish pirate, thou killer of children. For now I will give thee such a greeting as thou hast never had before. I have a message to thee from the dead King of Lethra, and from Wahrmund my friend, and thou hast still the mark of my weapon upon thy face. Stay, Hungwar! I call to thee to stay, as I called to Osbert in the days of old!"

And Hungwar heard, and he raged like a berserker, but he came not to Wulnoth, for in his heart he feared him more than all the warriors of Wessex.

And now the fight went against the Danes, and Bishop Eadred smote down Sidroc the elder, and Osric

smote down Sidroc the younger and Oskettle. And Ethelred the King, he smote Frena; and Alfred the Atheling laid Osbern low.

And all around that thorn tree the dead lay piled high like unto a wall, Saxon and Dane, still clutching each other in the last fierce hand-grips of death. And the fighters were weary with slaughter and the swords tired of their song. And then, for the first time in any decisive battle since their landing, the Danes broke and retreated, and Hungwar led them, galloping off on his war-horse and waving his arms as if the evil spirit had entered into him. And so ended the battle, and the Saxons were the masters of the field of slaughter.

And yet it was at great cost, for many were slain, and while the Danes could bring a score for each one dead, the men of Wessex were few, and the men of Mercia and Northumbria were jealous of them, and would have joyed to see them beaten, and would not come to their aid.

So back went the King and the Atheling and their soldiers, and the eagles and the crows gathered over the field of slaughter, and the wolf howled for joy from the forest as he called his brethren to the feast, smelling the blood from afar.

But Wulnoth looked to where, far away, he saw the Raven of Odin in retreat, and he looked to the cross which the priests carried before the army, and he remembered his words and felt that the White Christ was the strongest, and that they who served Him were

no nithings, when it came to making the sword sing and playing the man's game.

Now, this is how the Danes were beaten by the Saxons of Wessex on the field of slaughter which is called Ashdune, and this is how the Raven of Odin fled from the sign of the White Christ.

CHAPTER XVII

The Passing of Ethelred the King

NOW, though the men of Wessex had beaten the Danes with a great slaughter at the battle of Ashdune, little rest did the weary land have from the war-song, but day by day the sword gleamed and the red flames roared, and the Black Strangers came in foraying bands.

Like the leaves before the wind, like the snow on the northern blast, so did the Danes seem to gather, until even the boldest and the bravest felt their hearts fail, and asked each other what could be done to free the land from these savage, barbarian invaders, who seemed like to swamp the whole world and plunge it back into paganism again.

And now the men of Mercia, and those of Northumbria and Cantua, had occasion to lament that they had not joined with Wessex, and, forgetting their own quarrels, striven side by side against the common foe. For

to every part of the fair land the Danes marched, and their pathway was death and ruin, and of them the English said —

"Of what use is it to war against them, for if there be thirty thousand slain to-day, there will be twice thirty thousand in their place to-morrow?"

Yet, for all that, did Ethelred the King, and Alfred his brother, fight as brave men should, calling upon all their men to trust in the Lord and be of good cheer; and, whilst in other parts of the land the invaders were striking terror to all hearts, in the land of the West Saxons they were frequently driven back and put to flight.

But it was hard work and sad; for the hands of the strongest must grow weary, and the hearts of the mightiest must fail sometimes; and there was no rest for King or for Prince. To-day they would face the foe in one place, and the next they would be in rapid march to strike an unexpected blow in quite another direction.

But the land wept, for there was no corn sown and no harvest to reap, because men said that there was little wisdom in sowing fields that were to be trampled down in the war game, or in storing in barns, through which the red flames might leap.

Oh! those were sad days, when hunger and despair and battle were on every hand; and still, on and on the Danes pressed, and their long ships were on every coast and barring all the rivers, and even floating up to London itself.

And a merry game did Wulnoth and his robber companions play, though alas, now of that fifty but half remained. To-day here, to-morrow there, hurrying at the King's behest, enduring fatigue and peril with laughter, and doing hero deeds that rivalled the best of the Danish holdas' achievements.

Little of Edgiva did Wulnoth see in those days, but at night, when he rested with his band in the forest depths, or lay counting the watchful stars, then he would think of his Princess, and in fancy see her face, and he would dream a good dream of the days that should be, when England was England once more.

Yet never did he forget the friend of his boyhood and the promise he had made; and he wondered when and how he should ever obtain tidings of Guthred the Prince.

"I can go but one step at a time," he murmured to himself. "This helping of Alfred is the first thing, and afterwards we will think of what may follow it." And then he would sit by the watch fire, while his rough companions lay around; and he would think, and think, of the White Christ, and the wonder story of His great love, and His death on the cross; and now he no longer called it a nithing tale, but thought it beautiful as the best of the sagas; and though he said naught of it to any, nor even let Edgiva know when he saw her, Wulnoth was beginning to understand, and to see that the Lord Christ was the mightiest, and the greatest, and the best, and indeed the very Bretwalda of all the angels.

But little time was there for thinking even on that matter; for it was fight, fight, day by day; now hunted, and now hunting — at this moment the Raven of Odin victorious, and the next the banner of Ethelred triumphant.

And in one battle did the forces meet at a place called Merton, not far from Ashdune; and there, while they strove, and now to one side now to the other the victory inclined, Ethelred the King was smitten by a spear, and fell wounded from his horse; and Wulnoth, and Osric, and Alfred, raised him up tenderly, and bore him from the field of slaughter, and then rushed back and threw themselves upon the foe, fighting fiercely until, when the evening shadows came, the Danes were glad to retire; for they had met with those who could strive as well as themselves.

And then did the Saxons take their wounded King; and, commanded by Alfred, they retreated swiftly and silently, and with hearts bowed down by sadness, so that they might find a place where the King could rest in safety.

And then did the King call his brother the Atheling to his side, and he spoke with him tenderly, and bade him be comforted.

"How could man die better than face to foe, striving for his country, and for the blessed Truth, dear brother?" he said. "Now I am wounded sore, and my spirit tells me that I shall die; and for that my heart rejoices, for by dying shall I gain a better crown than one of earthly power, and by death shall I enter into life."

And Alfred bowed his head and wept, for his heart was very sore now; and Wulnoth stood by, for his it was to guard the King's tent, and he wondered yet more and more; for here was a second King dying, and he also, like as Edmund had done, spoke of victory and life, and seemed glad and happy, and not like those of the Danes and the Old Saxons, who only spoke of going to the dark storm-land.

But they could not tarry long where the King lay, for the foe pressed too hard; and so they hurried southwards, and the army broke into small parties, that they might travel the more swiftly and securely. And so they came south by Winchester, the King's town, and even there they did not stay, but passed on into the land of Durnovaria, or as we now call it Dorchester. And there did the King tarry, for he was too sick to journey farther, though there was some talk of reaching the sea, and sending him afar into safety. But his wounds were bad, and his strength was gone, and his mind weary for his kingdom, and for the land at large, and for the faith of the Lord; and he knew that he must soon pass hence, and be at peace.

And to him came his aged mother Osburga, whom neither grief, nor peril, nor weariness could conquer; and she, and the Abbot Hugoline, and Alfred, they tended the King in his last hours of pain and sorrow, and whispered words of good cheer to him, while Osric, and Ethelred the Ealdorman, went back with the forces, and made another stand against the foe, who pursued hard upon their track.

And there did King Ethelred breathe his last, and commit his soul into the keeping of his Saviour; and from there did they carry his body to the minster at Wimborne, and there did they bury the King.

And Alfred the Atheling had the crown placed upon his head, and became Alfred the King; and of all Saxon Kings, did he prove the best, and the bravest, and the wisest; so that in after days his fame was sung and he was called "The Great Thane" and "The Bretwalda of the English" and "The Shepherd of his people."

Yet on that very day whereon he was crowned did Wulnoth the Wanderer come upon him in the church; and lo, he knelt, and he prayed, and as he prayed he wept; and Wulnoth spoke with the King, for Alfred made a friend of the Wanderer, and he asked him why he wept.

"Thou art King now, and thou hast a kingdom, and thou hast men to fight, and thou thyself art a warrior; wherefore, then, dost thou weep, O King?"

"Heavy is it to be a King, friend," the monarch answered, "and weary is the land wherein battle is ever raging; and great is the stewardship which I have. Therefore, I kneel in humbleness, and with tears I ask Him for help and for grace, that I may do my work and receive my reward."

"O King!" cried Wulnoth. "If thy God is the mightiest of gods, why does he not drive out the Danes, and scatter their host? I am puzzled, of a truth, O King, for I understand not this thing."

"And couldst thou understand all God's ways, then

wouldst thou be as wise as God. Does the warrior understand all his captain's plans? Nay, he receives his order, and he obeys his command, and he trusts his captain enough to know that each order is given for a reason. So is it with us, O Wanderer. We trust and we obey, and the end is with Him. His ways are greater than our ways, and His thoughts than our thoughts."

Sad and solemn was the crowning of the King, for there was no pomp and stately show now, as there had been of yore. Scarcely had he thanes to stand around him; scarcely had he people to aid him; there was no time for such empty things as pageant now; for almost ere the body of King Ethelred was laid to its rest, there came tidings of new and fresh hosts of Danes sweeping over the land.

And bitter was it for Mercia then; for the Black Strangers became as a terror to the bravest, and all men trembled at their name.

Across the country to Lindum[1] they swept; and from the sea other hosts poured into the land. They attacked and drove out King Burhred, and placed one named Ceolwulf in his place, as under-lord. Black and bitter was the treason of Ceolwulf the Thane, who had been Burhred's thane; for he, a Saxon, became a servant of the Danes; and of him it is said that he was fiercer than his masters, so that the land was laid waste.

And farther north, in Northumbria, the whole land was covered with the foe; and there Halfdane, whom

[1] Lincoln.

some called Hungwar's brother, led his forces and destroyed without ruth as he went, burning every church and monastery, and even the beautiful cathedral of Lindisfarne; and while the flames roared, and the sword sang, the wail of women, and the shriek of tortured little children, rose to mingle with it, and hope and faith died out in the land.

But down in Wessex, still the light shone, and still brave hearts resisted; though often it was hard and bitter work, and from being able to stand before the Danes, the forces frequently had to hurry, driven from place to place, yet ever inspired by the King to fresh courage and endeavor.

And in those days did Wulnoth do mighty deeds, and earn himself a name amongst men, for being a hero; so that the Danes knew and feared; and Hungwar himself trembled; for he knew that the day would come when he and Wulnoth would meet face to face; and then it would be a bitter day and dark for him.

Now, this is how King Ethelred was wounded in battle, and died of his wounds; and this is how the crown passed to Alfred the Atheling, and the whole land, from north to south, was overrun by the Black Strangers, and given to fire and sword.

CHAPTER XVIII

Of the Coming back of Guthrun

NOW, for nigh five years after King Alfred was crowned, did the land groan beneath the sword of the invaders; and everywhere there was battle; for when the Danes had none other to fight, then did they fight amongst themselves. And for nigh five years did Wulnoth lead amongst the King's chosen champions, and beat the foe back.

Seven years now had the Wanderer been in England, and yet he had gained no tidings of Guthred the Prince. Edgiva he saw several times, and sweet were their greetings, and dear the hours they spent together; but all too brief the time that was theirs.

Beautiful, with a wondrous beauty, was Edgiva now; and yet, though beautiful and a King's daughter, she was true to her lover, and would listen to no other suitors.

Yet still she would not give him her hand, nor did he ask it; for not yet had he owned that the Lord Christ was the greatest and noblest of all, and not yet was the land at rest; and Edgiva would not have him think of aught save his duty to his King and to the land.

"Oh! Wulnoth, my hero," she would say to him, "hard is thy task, but truly thou dost do it. And Wyborga, who grows wiser as she grows older, reveals to me that harder yet shall it be; and the King shall flee as a nameless man and a landless man, and thou shalt abide with him. But be brave, for through it all shalt thou come to victory and honor."

Then did Wulnoth kiss her fair hand, and answer, and say — "My Princess, I am thy watcher and thy servant, as I am thy faithful lover, and all that thou dost command, that will I strive to do."

Thus did the days pass and grow to years, and the years grew until five had passed; and then came Guthrun and a mighty host, marching towards Exeter, near which city the King lay with his forces. And when the army started to march, then from the mouth of the Thames their fleet sailed to the West, and from the sides of the long ships gleamed the shields of many warriors.

Now, the King of the West Saxons heard news of the marching of Guthrun's host, and of the sailing of the long ships, and he called his thanes and captains to counsel, and he said —

"Now we have two forces to meet, one by land and one by sea. Those on land march to Exeter, and those by sea will seek to land at the nearest spot."

"Wise are the Danes, O King," answered Wulnoth bitterly. "They know the weakest spot at which to strike. For this Exeter, is it not now menaced by the Britons from West Wales, and will they not help our foes?"

"We must trust in the mercy of the Lord, Wanderer," the King answered. "Would to God that all the inhabitants of this unhappy land would fight as brethren. We should soon thrust the Danes out then." [1]

"Little good to wish that, O King," cried one gaunt old warrior. And the King smiled.

"Ay, we will not waste time in idle wishes. Now this is my rede. Thou knowest that I have caused to be built long ships, like those which the Danes use. Now these lie at the coast towns; and I counsel that we man them and put to sea, and there trust to our God to give us the victory over this foe."

"And, meantime, the foe on land, O King?" cried Wulnoth.

"They will have reached the city, Wanderer, and there will they surely tarry, seeking perchance to make league with the Britons, and waiting for their friends to join them. Now mark you — if we are favored by Heaven, and can defeat the ships, we will play their own game. We will land from our ships and sweep

[1] My readers will remember that the Britons were always at war with the Saxons, by whom they had been driven into that land which we now call Wales, and into Cornwall, or South Wales. The Welsh are the descendants of the Britons; and the word *Welsh* comes from the Saxon word *wealhas*, which means a stranger, or some one you cannot understand.

towards Exeter, and give the city to the flame, and put them to the sword."

"By the bracelets of Odin, King," laughed Wulnoth, "thou art marking out a big task for thyself. But if this is in thy mind, I for one am well content to try it; and methinks I shall love to feel the ships leap over the waves, and to join in a sea-fight again."

So, all the thanes agreeing, the King and his forces hurried southward and got to their ships, and were ready to go on board and set sail, as soon as the foe appeared.

And presently, from afar, the sails appeared, and the hearts of some sank as they saw the number; yet the King prayed to Heaven for help, and made haste to prepare for battle.

In years long after, there was another little fleet of ships not so far from that very spot, waiting while a mighty armada came, stately and confident, up the Channel; and what happened then, happened also in the reign of Alfred the King.

For, as the fleet of Danish warships drew near, dark clouds gathered in the sky, and the tempest roared, and the wind blew, and the great waves grew, and thundered against the white cliffs, and the King pointed and cried —

"See, O friends, Heaven does not desert us; and what we are too weak to do, that God does in the strength of His might. Look, and doubt no more."

And indeed it seemed as if the King's words were true, for the Danish ships were caught by the tempest,

and the great sails were rent, and the strong masts shivered, and many were engulfed, and others dashed on the rocks; and the remainder turned to flee, and were pursued by Alfred's ships, and vanquished; and thus it happened that for the first time the Saxons of Wessex gained a sea-fight, and taught the proud invaders a lesson.

Then did Alfred and his soldiers hasten back to Exeter; and there they found Guthrun and his host, and they set a siege about the city, and put the Danes into a hard case; so that Guthrun besought Alfred to make peace with him, and he swore by the bracelets of Odin, and by the hammer of Thor, that he would keep truce.

"Now," said Wulnoth, when he heard of this, "if thou art counselled by me, O King, thou wilt make no truce here. Thou hast them in thy hand, and I would make an end of them. The pledge of a Dane is as a rune written on the sand. You may search for it, and it will not be found."

But the King was so noble that he believed not that a holda like Guthrun would break his word; and, moreover, he was afraid to tarry long before the city, for fear he should be cut off by other bands who might come. So a truce was signed, and the Danes departed from the neighborhood, and for a little while the land had peace, and the King busied himself in building more long ships in case of need.

But soon the King was to learn that Wulnoth was right when he said the Danes were not to be trusted,

for suddenly after a few months, and when the Winter held all the land in its iron grip, and food was hard to come by for the soldiers; back, sweeping like a flame over the land, came Guthrun and Hungwar with him, and a vast force, greater than ever; and Guthrun and Hungwar had sworn by Thor, that they would make an end of Alfred, who had worried and resisted them so long, when all the other Saxon kings had bowed to their sway.

And tidings were brought to the King as he sat in his hall, and then did Wulnoth laugh and say —

"Now, O King, if there is any power in thy God, let it be shown; for this time there will be no mistake. Hungwar and Guthrun have made friends again, and they march together, and I tell thee that from end to end of thy kingdom they will leave nothing but ruin and death. Thou shouldst have crushed the head while thou hadst it in thy power to do so, and then perchance the tail would have died. Now head and tail are joined, and there comes a terror to the land, O King. Of a truth there comes a terror."

"Let us not meet trouble till it comes, Wanderer," the King answered. "Ho! my thanes, go forth and summon me all my bands — all who can bear war gear and carry lance — and this time, as the Wanderer says, an end shall be made."

So the thanes went forth, and they came back with a sad tale, which they told with hanging heads. The fear of the foe was in all the land, and men were weary of being harried and marched to war, and every one was

fleeing. Churls and thralls, thanes and sethcundmen, all alike had gone, fleeing. Many of them had gone across the narrow waters to the island beyond — the Isle of Wight — while others bowed in submission to the invaders; and Alfred the King found himself a King without a people, with hardly any whom he could look to, with his best soldiers melting away, as the snow melts when the sun shines upon it.

Oh! bitter was it to the King, and bitter was it to the brave hearts who loved him; for now it seemed as if the kingdom of Wessex would share the fate of the rest of the land, and groan under the rod of the pagan.

And then spake Wulnoth again, and he said —

"Now up and let us act, for these Danes will give us little rest if they once come up with us; and though I fear not death, I have somewhat to do ere I close my eyes. I have a word for Hungwar, and I have a quest to make. Come, King, and come, comrades, and never be discouraged. We must flee for the time, but it will not be forever that we are to remain hidden.

"The sun may be hidden by a cloud for the time, O King, but it is not lost forever."

"But what shall we do with our dear ones, our tender ones?" cried the King. "With whom shall we leave them?"

"With whom dost thou think they will tarry, son, save with those they love?" answered Osburga, speaking stoutly. "Do we fear the cold, and the wet, more than the risk of being taken by the wicked Danes? Nay,

son, I, thy mother, go with thee, for one; and so does thy royal spouse Elswitha, and her attendant, the Lady Edgiva, herself a royal princess."

"This may not be," cried the King; but the others said that the words were wise words, and that so they would have less care than if the Queen were left unprotected and alone.

So by night a little army, such a poor little force, was gathered; and with the Queen, and Osburga, and Edgiva, and old Wyborga, they journeyed by forest and wild, and on till they came to a wild and desolate place [1] where two angry streams met, with wild moors and dreary swamps extending for many a mile, over which none might with safety pass, unless they knew the pathways that were sure.

And here in this desolate place did the King, who now had no hall, abide in humble huts which they built with their own hands; and often did he and those with him have no food, unless they first caught it by their own skill.

Fish they snared from the waters, and wild deer they chased across the moor, and they lived like outlaws and nameless ones. Hard was it then for the King, and sorely did he grieve for the unhappy land; for ever and again his spies came with reports of the grievous work of the Danes, and of the suffering of the people, and his heart was full of pain. Scarce could he go from his hiding-place because of the foe, for he knew that they

[1] Athelney, a small spot at the confluence of the rivers Tone and Parret in Somersetshire.

were gathering closer and closer, searching for him to make an end of him.

Sometimes he had to wander quite alone, without a single attendant, and dressed in the poorest garments of a churl, and yet never in all did the faith of the King fail, and never did his mother or his wife fail him in his need.

Now the King had a jewel[1] which he valued, and which he hung round his neck; and this was a stone of polished crystal, two inches long, and cunningly wrought with gold and green enamel; and seated thereon was a figure with a lily spray in each hand, and surrounding the jewel was a gold band on which were written these words —

ALFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN. (Alfred had me made).

And in his wanderings amidst the bogs and the fens, this jewel was lost, so that the King grieved sore, and said it was a bad omen, and that his kingdom was lost to him also.

But Wyborga came, and spoke, and her words were heard by all, and she said —

"Grieve not for the thing which is lost, O King, for in other days will it be found. Rather rejoice, for thou shalt have a better jewel than that which is lost, and thy crown shall yet shine bright, and thy fame

[1] This jewel was found long afterwards, perfect and undefaced, and it is now preserved at Oxford. For eight hundred years it had lain in the peaty soil, just where the King must have dropped it.

remain for all time, so that no hero shall have more renown and none do better deeds."

"Thou dost speak good words, Wyborga," answered the King, but now he spoke a little wearily. "May they come true!" And Wyborga answered, "They will surely come true."

"Wyborga, didst thou say that to comfort the King only?" asked Wulnoth, when he saw the wise woman alone. And she smiled —

"Wulnoth, have not all my words come true to thee? But now I have a work for thee to do, and a journey for thee to go, seeing that here the King needs thee not."

"What is thy work, Wyborga?" asked Wulnoth, "and whither must I journey?"

"Take with thee of thy band those who are left to the King," the old woman said, "and journey thou southward towards the sea."

"For what purpose, O Wyborga?" he asked. And she explained —

"Wulnoth, I have seen a vision; and in the vision I beheld long ships come over the sea; and in one of them floated the raven banner of Regner, and beneath it stood Hubba, and Biorn Ironsides, who have returned from their work in Mercia. I saw these ships come to shore, and I saw a band of heroes, and thee amongst them; and the banner of Regner fell to thee, and Hubba was slain, and the Danes fled. Go now, and see how this may be, for methinks the vision was sent to me, that I might tell thee, and that the work might begin.

The King's exile shall soon be done, and the darkness shall flee away."

"Now by my beard," Wulnoth cried, "this is the best news thou hast told me for many a day, and right gladly do I go to do thy bidding."

"Tell not the King," the wise woman said, "else he may desire to come with thee, and evil may come of it. Go thou, Wulnoth, and may success be thine; and I will make excuse to the King for thine absence."

So Wulnoth called to his companions, and they started off on their journey; and the heart of Wulnoth beat high with hope, and he felt that Wyborga's word would be a true word, and that he would slay Hubba, and capture the famous raven banner, which struck terror to the hearts of all men.

Now, this is how Guthrun the Dane came again with his host and forced the King to flee, and this is how Wulnoth started for Devonshire at the bidding of Wyborga the Wise Woman.

CHAPTER XIX

Of the Capturing of the Raven Banner

NOW, away went Wulnoth and his companions, of whom but twenty now remained, but of that twenty not one but was a warrior indeed, proved in many a fight.

Fully armed were they, and in the best of spirits, since the Wanderer had told them that he was going to seek adventure and glory, and the man's game; and they were weary of hiding amidst the marshes, like herons in pools.

After leaving Athelney, they crossed into a dense forest; and here, in one of the glades, they came across a party of Danes, who evidently were searching for the King.

The Black Strangers were resting, and their horses grazed near by; but when they saw Wulnoth and his men they sprang up, seizing their weapons, and bidding the comrades stand and declare their business.

"Ye are nameless men it seems," the leader said sternly, and therefore we have no desire to do ye any harm. But say, have ye heard aught of the hiding-place of this Saxon King, Alfred, for him do we search for."

"I think," began Wulnoth, then he stopped; and the leader demanded what it was that he thought.

"Well, I think that we are weary, having to walk while ye have horses," the Wanderer made reply. "Moreover, I think 't is a shame that Saxons should walk, while Danish thieves ride, especially when they ride Saxon horses which they have stolen."

"How, knave!" roared the viking leader. And Wulnoth laughed —

"I think, moreover," he went on, "that we will have those horses; and as the land will be well quit of such pirates, we will slay you, ere we go on our way. To the game, Danes! to the game! for there are blows to be dealt."

Then his own men drew their weapons, and the Danes, nothing loath, made ready also; and the leader said to Wulnoth —

"Since thou hast talked so much, I will speak a word to thee, and it shall be thy message to the storm-land."

"Speak then," laughed Wulnoth, and he raised his axe, and smote a mighty stroke, and the Dane fell stricken, as an ox falls before the flesher's blow.

And then did the fight commence, but it was not long; for Wulnoth was as a berserker now, and he smote such blows as none could withstand, so that soon

the Danes were in flight, and the band had horses and casting-spears, and were speeding on their way again.

"By Thor! 't is more pleasant to ride than to walk," laughed Wulnoth, "and when it is riding on a good Saxon nag taken from a Danish thief, why, then 't is doubly enjoyable." And at that the others laughed gleefully, as they cantered on.

Green and fresh were the woods, and fair to look upon; but the eyes flashed and the brows frowned, when the band left the woods and rode across the country, and saw homestead after homestead burnt and ruined, and the bodies of the murdered ones left there for the birds and the wolves to feed upon.

It has been laid to Alfred's charge that he showed no mercy to his prisoners when he captured the crews of two warships that had been driven ashore; but in truth there was little call, or room, for mercy, for the Danes had made sure of their work, and left only revenge in the hearts of men.

And as the companions rode on in something of gloomy silence, feeling as though these sights of desolation fell iron-heavy on their hearts, suddenly from afar came the shrill shriek of a woman in pain or fear, and the sounds of strife; and Wulnoth placed a finger to his lips in warning, and galloped quietly forward in the direction of the sound, followed by his companions; and each man loosened his sword, or grasped his spear, while there came into their eyes a look, like the hungry light in the eyes of the starving wolf when he smells blood from afar.

And there they saw a cottage, with some dozen Black Strangers before it; with an old man lying dead, and his old wife panting her life away, while three of the cruel ones were placing a noose around a young man's neck, and some of the others were tying a fair maiden to a tree, to use her for a target.

The Danes halted as they heard the horses dashing forward, but little time had they to think, little time even to defend themselves.

With a shrill Saxon shout the companions were upon them, and the murderers were smitten down, not one getting away to tell the tale; and then Wulnoth sprang from his horse and lifted the poor old woman's head, while the others speedily unfastened the girl and set the youth free.

"How is this?" they asked. "What had you done to offend them?" And the young man laughed bitterly.

"What had I done?" he cried. "Know you so little of the Danes, as to think that one need do anything, for them to make excuse for murdering? Our cottage chanced to be in their way as they passed, that was enough. They needed some sport, and what better sport than burning and murdering?"

"Well, comrade, they have got sport of another kind now," laughed Wulnoth, "though I fear they have done mischief enough here; for this poor old dame is surely dying."

"Poor mother," the young man said with a sob, while the girl in silence bent over the dying woman. "Yet 't is best for her to follow father; for since these

Danes have come, 't has been naught but hunger, and fear, and suffering; and now she will be at peace."

"Do you fight the Danes?"

The question was asked with terrible intensity, and the men looked at the girl as, supporting the dying woman, she glanced up —

"Ay, maiden, that is our business in life; and we hope to do a little more of it, ere long."

"Then, Garth, go you with them. Go," and the girl turned to the young man. "There is nothing for you to do here. I and others will bury these poor bodies; you, a man, need not tarry for that. Go, and let each day see a Dane slain in memory of this work. Revenge is sacred now. Go, brother."

"But you!" cried the young man to his sister. "Besides, these warriors may not care for a youth to be of their number."

"By Thor, that is wrong, lad. We will take all the strong arms we can secure, and then we could do with more. And if this maiden can care for herself for the time, then we will take you. 'T is the work every honest Saxon should be doing now."

"I can take care of myself; go you, Garth," and she looked at the lad again.

Then did the young man come near to Wulnoth, and he said in low tones —

"Stranger, who hast helped us, and slain our foes, and who art going to fight the Danes, I also have made up my mind to do that, and there are others of like mind, only we lack leaders. Now, what would you say to a

hundred youths who can each shoot, and hit the clout four times out of five?"

"What would I say!" cried Wulnoth heartily, "I would say that they were worth their weight in gold at this time. Boy, there is a King who needs to have his crown placed firmly upon his head once more, and thy hundred youths with their bows, might have much to do with settling it there."

"I care less for the King than I do for revenge," was the fierce answer. "Ah! I know our good priest would have told me that was wrong. Well, they have killed him, and killed my love, and I want revenge. The hundred shall be thine, if thou wilt tarry a few hours."

"We will wait," answered Wulnoth, "and while we tarry we will aid the maiden to bury the dead. She speaks like a redesman. That is her part. Thine it is to strike blows."

The young man turned and disappeared amidst the trees; and the companions in their rude yet kindly way performed the solemn offices for the murdered man and his wife, the poor old soul having breathed her last; and then back came the lad Garth, and with him groups of stout young fellows, sturdy carls who had fled from the foe, and who, having no work now, thought but of one thing — that one thing which all Saxons throughout the land desired — *revenge*.

So that evening Wulnoth set forward again, with a hundred of archers in his train, and they marched till they came to a masterless band, and the leader put his men in array and prepared for battle.

But Wulnoth halted his force, and rode alone, and gave the robber greeting, and spake to him and his men of the wrong in the land, and the need that was, and showed how his comrades were part of just such another band; and the Saxon outlaws talked together, and then threw in their lot with the Wanderer, so that now he had a hundred archers, and sixty horsemen at his back.

And into Devonshire they came; and there the stout old Ealdorman Borric came out with his men, and demanded who they were, and whither they journeyed, and Wulnoth told him that they journeyed to the coast, to watch for the coming of the foe, and oppose their landing. And at that Borric laughed grimly, and looked with bright eyes from beneath his shaggy brows.

"So thou wouldst oppose the Danes with thy handful!" he cried. "Hast any idea of how many these foes are?"

"I ought to have," answered Wulnoth coolly, "since I came over with them, serving under Hungwar." And at that the Ealdorman stared harder, and said grimly —

"That word needs explaining, my friend."

So Wulnoth told him part of his story, and how he had left the King, though he told not where the King was. And Borric smote his hands together, and he cried —

"Now thou dost shame us, Wanderer, since that is what thou callest thyself. All too slack have we been in this matter. We have sat still and let the foes come.

Now I will send messengers throughout the land, and we will see what force we can gather, and we will make one fight, a good fight, and a true fight; and if we die we die, and if we drive these vile pirates off, then we will thank God for it."

"Now," thought Wulnoth, "this is strange! I set out with a score, and not knowing where another would come from; and here I am like to have an army ere long. Truly there is something in Wyborga's rede to me."

So Wulnoth and his force, and some more who joined them, pushed forward towards the coast; and the people, as they went, joined them, for they were all weary of the slaughter, and determined to make another try to shake off the Danish yoke from the neck of beautiful England.

And for days they waited, and each day brought more and more strength, and each day Wulnoth, like a wise leader, made his men exercise and keep watch; and he placed beacons all along the coast, to give warning if the foe came by night; and then, one day, as the sun rose and scattered the white sea mist, they saw coming down towards them, the long row of stately long ships; and, as Wyborga had prophesied, there floated the raven banner of Regner Lodbrok.

And at that some grew afraid, for they looked upon the banner as being of magic powers; but Wulnoth laughed and told them how he had seen it fleeing from the field, and how it was foretold that it would be captured in that very fight.

And now, in towards the shore the ships came, and

the Danish leaders stood and laughed right scornfully, as they saw the Saxons drawn up to receive them; and they cried —

"Tarry there, O Saxons. Tarry till we come, for our swords are thirsty, and we lack foes to satisfy them!" And then Wulnoth answered —

"Be sure that we will tarry, son of Regner. Be sure of it, for we have journeyed long to reach here in time; and also I have a word for thee which shall be as my word to Wiglaf thy boxer, Hubba, thou nithing."

Then Hubba knew that it was the Wanderer who spoke, and he turned to Biorn Ironbeard — him who before had tried to cut the iron mace handle — and he said, grimly —

"By Odin's twelve companions, Ironbeard, yonder is that Wanderer of whom we have heard before. There will be rough play where he stands." And Ironbeard laughed with glee, and gave the word to lower the sails.

Down came the sails, and round came the ships; and from their sides rained the arrows and the casting-spears; but from the shore came others in reply, and wherever the arrow of Garth sped, there a Dane went to the storm-land on its point.

Then into the sea foam the warriors sprang, and rushed forward with shields upraised and swords bare, and the man's game began, and the wounded fell on both sides. And there strode Biorn Ironbeard clearing him a pathway with his wide-sweeping sword; and to him went Borric the Ealdorman, and Borric took a mighty mace, and he smote once, and Ironbeard

staggered; and he smote twice, and Ironbeard fell on his knees; and he smote yet again, and Ironbeard fell dead.

Then did the Saxons cry in triumph, and Wulnoth shouted to the Ealdorman, — "Thou hast had thy prize, O friend, may I also have mine!"

"And that thou shalt have, if I am thy prize," shouted Hubba, and he came striding on, his banner behind him; and all the forces of the Danes, and the people of the land met, and surged around, and for the time drove them apart.

But then Wulnoth whirling an axe in either hand, as he had been taught of old by Osth the giant, dashed against the Danes, and they shrank back; for to them he looked like a wild berserker, he raged so; and he reached the place where the banner of Regner waved, and with one blow he cut down the banner bearer, and with another he smote back his champion watcher, and then he hurled one axe away, and waved the banner aloft, and cleaved himself a road through the Danes with his weapon.

And then the vikings cried to Hubba that his banner was stolen; and the son of Regner came, raging like a bear, towards Wulnoth; and so at last these two met, and Wulnoth laughed right joyously —

"Oh! greeting, greeting, Hubba. Long have I sought thee. Now, greeting!" But Hubba spake not, but he aimed a mighty blow at Wulnoth's head, and cut clean through the wing of his helm.

"A good blow, Hubba, a mighty blow," laughed Wulnoth. "Yet methinks this is better. Dost

remember the mace which belonged to thy brother, and how I cut its handle in twain? Look now, Hubba, and say is this blow as good?"

Now while he spoke, three blows, mighty blows did Wulnoth turn with his shield; and then he smote, and men said that never was there such a blow, for neither shield nor mail could turn it, but the axe sped through all as if 't were but thin bark; and it fell on Hubba's side where the shoulder fits the neck, and it cut through bone and muscle, and the arm fell, and the axe went on and bit deep into the side; and Hubba fell as the oak falls before the lightning, fell at the feet of Wulnoth the Wanderer, while all the Danes cried out in dismay at what had been done.

But the people of Wessex, they pressed on cheering, for their hearts were encouraged, and they felt that the Danes were being defeated; and the fight rolled this way, and that, now towards the sea, now towards the land, and great deeds were done, and many a warrior fell.

But the Danes gave way slowly and stubbornly, and at last they were beaten, and they turned and fled back to their ships — beaten as they had never been beaten before, save at the field of Ashdune.

And they took the body of Hubba the son of Regner Lodbrok, and they sang many a death-song for him, and made lamentations, as for one of the mightiest. And they buried him in a warrior's grave, with honor, and with all his weapons; and they raised over him a heap, and set stones about, and called it after the dead

Chieftain — Hubblestanes — by which name the place is still known to men.

And the people of Wessex drove the Danes from the shore, and took much plunder, and returned to their homes rejoicing. And Borric the Ealdorman went back to his stronghold, and he said to Wulnoth —

"Ye are going back to the King, O Wanderer. Now tell him that this must not stand as it has done before. Victory must be added to victory; and I will send word through all the kingdom, and gather men everywhere; and when the King is ready, we will march to meet him, and may God be for us again."

Then Wulnoth parted from Borric; and with his own company, and the archers, and the band of masterless men, he set forward to rejoin the King at Athelney.

Now, this is how Wulnoth slew Hubba, and carried the banner of Regner Lodbrok away to King Alfred.

CHAPTER XX

Of the Hunting of the Ring

NOW, after that Wulnoth and his companions had set forth on their journey into Devonshire, the Danes, who were led by Guthrun and Hungwar, began to press on, spreading over the whole face of the country, searching for King Alfred, whom they were determined to capture and put to death.

At first, hidden away amidst the marshes of Athelney, he was fairly safe; but bit by bit the forces drew nearer and surrounded the whole place; and they who tarried with the King knew not what to do, for they liked not to leave their monarch and seek their own safety, and yet they saw that did they tarry long, so large a band would be certain to draw the attention of their foe to their retreat.

More than that, it became increasingly difficult for them to obtain supplies of food without being

discovered, and so their hearts sank within them, and they felt that the battle was lost, and that the cause of their Lord would fall and the pagan worship of the Norse gods be established.

And Alfred the King pondered over this, for he also saw these things, and he knew that his few were trusty and loyal, and would sooner perish with him than desert him in his hour of need.

So he called a council of his most wise and devoted thanes, and to that council came also Osburga his mother; and there, in the dreary and deserted marsh-land, they sat round their fire and talked of what should best be done.

"The Danes are as the leaves," they said, "and for one killed many come. Who can deliver us from them?"

Then said Abbot Hugoline, and he spoke in calm tones, as a man who had faith in that which he said —

"O thanes, and you our royal Alfred, let us not be downcast; for if no earthly power can aid us, still God is able to deliver us from the Danes, as he delivered his servant Daniel from the lions, and the three Hebrew children from the raging fiery furnace."

"Thou art right, Abbot," answered the King, "and while we have him to look to, we will not despair. Now this is my rede — Here together we cannot tarry, since our numbers will betray us, and our foe is too powerful for us to stand against. We must separate —"

"Nay, now nay, O King," they cried. "We will not leave you."

"Now hear me," answered the King. "If I never

more might have need of you, I might say tarry here and let us make an end of our misfortunes and die as men should. But I do need you — I shall need you to fight with me for this our country and for our faith. For a little while the clouds darken our sky, but presently the time will come, and we shall need all the aid we can obtain."

"The Wanderer and his men have deserted us," murmured some; but the King answered that Wulnoth had done what he wished all to do; he had gone to gather men, and prepare for the time when they might take the field again.

"This is what ye must all do," he said, "disperse, and go each his own way; and to all true men give greeting, and bid them prepare weapons and hide them away, and be ready to hasten to our standard when the summons shall come."

"Now the King's word is a wise word," said old Osburga, and all there listened with reverence to her words, not only because she was the King's mother, but because she was wise. "Let his commands be obeyed, and let us part one from another."

"But, noble lady, what of you and the Queen and the noble maidens who have shared our trials and wanderings?" asked Osric. And the King said —

"Of that I have thought. My mother and my wife, and the ladies with them, must journey with the Abbot here to a retreat of which he knows, where they will be safe. 'T is not far hence; and if need be I can communicate with them."

So, though it grieved the hearts of them all, and seemed like the giving up of their defence, the Saxons said that the King's word must be obeyed; and in stern sorrow they prepared to depart, each with his few followers going his own way; all save Osric, who tarried with the King as his companion.

"Now shall we be safer," said the King, "two can live securely where a score would be in peril. Farewell, dear friends, and lose not heart nor faith."

So the King embraced his wife, and received his mother's blessing, and clasped hands with his friends; and then, when the mists of the evening stole over the land, they all departed, each taking his own way through the marshlands, and leaving the King and Osric alone.

And that the King's word was a wise word was proved; for the next day came bands of Danes, and the King and Osric were hidden in the marsh, lying in the mud and covered with the rushes; and they watched the foe come to the place where they had tarried, and make search, and give the huts to the fire, and then go away angry and disappointed; for they had no thought that the King had taken warning and fled.

And Hungwar and Guthrun were told; and loud did they curse in their fury, and they ordered that bands should go in every direction, and search night and day, giving orders to all the Saxon churls that remained that if they saw the King they were to seize him and deliver him up, else otherwise they should be put to the torture, and their wives and children sold into slavery, and their roofs given to the flames.

Little did Guthrun and his companion know the stout hearts of the West Saxons; for those very threats only made the churls sullenly defiant, and determined that in no case would they betray their King, did they chance to meet with him.

Moreover, the Saxons learnt that the retreat at Athelney had been betrayed by a knave; and him they caught and hanged on a tree, and thus did they pay him for taking Danish gold and betraying Alfred the King.

Now, for many days did Alfred and Osric wander; and the King was hunted hither and thither like a beast of the forest, and often compelled to flee; and his illness pressed sore upon him, yet his courage was undaunted, and his faith clear; and often when he lay alone with Osric in the fens, he would discourse with him concerning the fleet he was determined to build when the Danes were conquered and England free again.

"Thou art sure that England shall be free again, O King?" Osric said. And the King replied, "As certain as I am that the sun will rise to-morrow."

And thus did the King fare all the days that Wulnoth was away; and only twice did he manage to see his wife and mother for a short space; but he heard by faithful messengers how his companions prospered in their work, and how all over the land the Saxons were saying that if the King would only come forth from his hiding and lead them, they would risk striking another blow at the foe beneath whose cruel rule the land groaned.

But the King still tarried for a little, for he wanted

his friends to gather all they could; and he desired that the Danes should grow over-confident, thinking that all opposition was gone, and thus relax their vigilance.

And it chanced that one day Alfred the King came to a rude hut hidden away in a desolate place, where dwelt a poor neatherd, alas now with but few cattle to attend, and those he had to hide away in the middle of the marshland, else they had surely been stolen by the enemy.

"Now, Osric, my friend," said Alfred, "I must to-day receive tidings from Hugoline. Go thou and glean them, and I will abide here. I will seek shelter with these good people, and tarry for your return."

"Will they not betray you?" asked Osric, for he knew of the Danes' words to the peasants. But the King smiled and answered —

"Who would know in this poor way-worn wanderer the King of Wessex? My very misery makes me safe, friend. Go, and rest satisfied that I may tarry here in security."

So Osric went; and Alfred approached the cottage and knocked with his staff, and then, waiting, he heard sounds of strife within, and a woman railing at some one, and he said to himself —

"We have a shrewish tongue here, a weapon that the bravest man may well fear."

Then the door opened, and a man looking somewhat flurried, appeared, and asked what he might want.

"I beg for a shelter and a little food," said the King. And then a woman appeared, and cried shrilly that they

had little enough for themselves, and that they had no wish to bestow that on thriftless wanderers who were doubtless too lazy to work for their living.

"Turn him away, goodman," she said to her husband. "Turn him away, and let him taste thy cudgel."

Now the man looked as though he would have liked to admit the King; and as Alfred was turning to go, he touched him slyly, and, thrusting his tongue into his cheek, he said aloud —

"Yes, indeed, get you gone, rogue. Dost think that we will harbor such as thou art? Most like thou hast been serving with the King; and the Danes have ordered us to give no aid to any such."

And then he received a sounding smack on his cheek; and his wife, her eyes flashing with anger, cried —

"Now out on thee for a nithing! Shall we indeed be ordered about by the Danes? I would I had them here, I would trounce them with my besom handle. Art thou going to turn one of our own countrymen from the door because the Danes ordered it, forsooth? Thou hadst better do as a true man should, and hasten to find the King, and offer him thy service. There, get to thy work; tending cattle is all thou art fit for; and as for thee, stranger, come in and tarry; and not all the Danes in the land shall direct what I am to do."

"'T was the only way to get over her," whispered the man, with a grin. "Nay, never mind for the clout I received, I am pretty used to her hand. Well, thou hast got to stay with her to-day, and not I, and her

temper is waspish — the Lord save thee from her tongue, and grant she may be better tempered when I return this evening."

So Alfred went in, and the woman snapped out, as if half repenting of her kindness, that he must make himself useful and bring her in kindlings.

This Alfred did right willingly; and the woman having mended her fire, set her rude loaves to bake before the embers.

"Now you can tarry and watch that they burn not," she said, "and turn them as they need it; for I have my work to think of."

"You may trust them to me, good dame," the King said. "'T is meet that he who eats of the bread should aid in its preparing."

Then the woman went out, and the King sat there, and for a while he thought of the bread; but presently he began to think of his unhappy kingdom, and of how the Danes were crushing it, and to ponder upon the best way to vanquish the foe.

He thought of all the places where battle might be most advantageously given, and he began, in thought, to fight his battles, until a strange smell assailed his nostrils; and he started up to see that the loaves, which he had so solemnly promised to watch, were all scorched and blackened.

And then the dame, also smelling the burnt bread, came running in; and if ever a woman scolded, that woman did, calling the King lazy, and idle, and good for nothing, and saying that all men were alike; for whether

they be Saxon or Dane, of old time or of new, when goodwives are angry, they scold and call men good for nothing.

And the King took it meekly, for indeed he was sorry that he had broken his word, and yet he could not tell her how it chanced. Indeed he felt that even if he could have done that, it would have been no excuse; for having given his word, he ought to have kept it, and not have suffered his thoughts to wander.

And the woman in her anger seized her stick and struck the King; and just at that moment the door opened, and in came Wulnoth and Osric; for Osric had met Wulnoth as he returned, and the Wanderer was searching for the King; and together they had come on.

And Wulnoth gave a cry of surprise, and grabbed hold of the woman, who turned her anger on him, crying out that she knew they were all robbers, but that some of them should have broken heads ere they robbed her.

"Tush, woman, no robbers we," said Wulnoth, as he grabbed her hands, for she had scratched his face with her nails. "Come, dame, what woman art thou to strike thy King?"

"The King!" cried the woman in dismay; and then she fell on her knees and cried for pardon; ending by saying that, King or not, he had no right to let her bread burn when he had promised to mind it.

"That for the bread," began Wulnoth, but the King stopped him —

"Nay, nay, Wanderer, 't is I who am to blame, and I deserved all the scolding which I have received.

Dame, I crave your pardon; rise and look not so dismayed; and if ever the sun shines in this poor land again, thou shalt not be sorry for having let the King sit by thy hearth, even if he has spoilt thy loaves."

Then did the King turn to Wulnoth and ask him where he had been, and what had been his fortune, and what it was he carried. And Wulnoth laughed and answered —

"A present for thee, O King. Say how thou dost like it," and he unrolled the great raven banner which he had captured, and told the King of how the Danes were routed, and how Borric was busy gathering all the men of Devon to come to his aid.

And Osric had good tidings also, that they of Somerset and Dorset and Hampshire (that is how we call the places now — of course in those days the names were different) were all ready to come when he summoned them; and all were eager to have another cast at their foe, and to strike for freedom and the Lord's faith.

And then did Alfred the King kneel down and the tears ran down his cheeks, and he thanked God for His goodness and mercy, and offered praise to Him for His greatness and majesty.

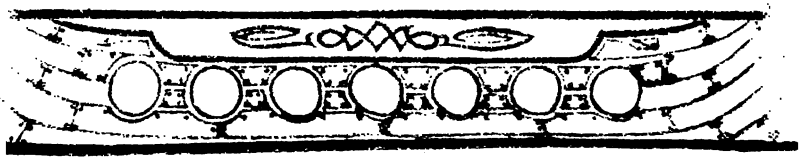
And Wulnoth looked and listened; and then a great feeling came to him that the King's God was the true God, and that the Lord Christ was the real Lord, and that he was a sinner who needed the pardon of which he had heard; and he knelt down, he who had knelt to no God before, and he said —

"O King, I seem to see dimly, as one who looks at the sun. I have found the mightiest and greatest, and he is the White Christ, and Him will I love and serve, and be his man."

And the King looked up and smiled, and he said —

"Now truly do I rejoice, Wanderer. I have found hope anew, and courage; and shall perchance find my crown and kingdom; but thou hast found a better thing — a crown and a kingdom that shall forever endure."

Now, this is how the King wandered as an outcast, and this is how the loaves were burnt, and this is how Wulnoth brought the banner to the King, and how he found the mightiest and the bravest of all.



CHAPTER XXI

Of the Gleeman who visited the Danish Camp

NOW, when the King left the neatherd's cottage he went back with Osric and Wulnoth to his old hiding-place at Athelney, for this was safe now, seeing that the Danes, having searched there, and having burnt the huts, were not likely to visit it again.

And here the three tarried, and talked of all that had happened, and received messages from one thane and another, telling of the number of men which he could bring.

And urgent were the prayers sent to Alfred that he would at once put himself at the head of the forces and give battle to the foe. But to these prayers the King replied that they must remain patient a little longer.

"O King, why dost thou delay?" cried Osric in wonder. "Did I not know thy hero soul, I should think

't was because thou wast afraid." And at that saying the King smiled, and made reply.

"And didst thou say so, O Osric, thou wouldst be telling but the simple truth," he said. And Osric stared and said —

"Read me thy rede, O King, for of a truth I cannot understand thy meaning; only this I know, that fear and Alfred were ever strangers."

"Yet I fear, my friend," the King answered, "for of a truth this cast has all our fortunes thrown with it; and if we fail now, we fail for good; therefore I fear to make the attempt before being certain of how best to succeed."

"A quick blow and a bold one, is ever my way," said Wulnoth. And the King shook his head.

"A good way, Wanderer, provided that thou knowest where to hit; otherwise thou mayest but smite the air, and be smitten thyself in turn, ere thou canst draw back for defence."

"What is thy counsel, O King?" asked Osric, "for what thou dost rede, that is certain to have wisdom in it."

"Now, Osric," answered the King, "but now thou didst say that didst thou not know me, thou wouldst have thought me a nithing; I say that did I not know thee, I should deem thee but a flatterer. Yet so far as my wisdom goes, thou shalt have it. These Danes have tarried here long, but here they will not surely stop, seeing that it is but a barren spot and they think that I have left it. Now, 't is my wish to find out, if

possible, whither they intend to journey, or whether they will still remain nigh the place; then shall we know best where to collect our forces, and when to strike the hardest and the surest."

"But how can this information be obtained, O King? Dost thou know any of their number whom thou canst buy?"

"Nay," answered King Alfred, "I know none, and if I did, I would not make the attempt to bargain with them; for I hold it a disgraceful thing to try to make a man turn traitor; or to have dealings with one vile enough to be one. Moreover, to deal with such a one is dangerous; for the man who will betray his chief may well be expected to betray those who trust him."

"A wise word, King; but still, if we deal not with a traitor, I see no way of obtaining the knowledge which we desire."

"I have a way, O my friend, if it may be put into practice; and methinks it can. Rest but a short time, and I will put it to the test."

So spake the King, and with that the two warriors were contented, for they knew that Alfred never used vain or empty words; and so they waited patiently, until it should please him to take them into his confidence.

Now as they sat at the fire talking, they heard the sound of a harp; and looking up, they beheld a wandering gleeman standing before them with a poor and broken harp; and he struck the chords and sang, and his voice was faint and weak; yet he sang a good

song of England in the days when the Danes had not come to it, and he sang of the good days that should come, when once again the land should be free; and Osric said when the song was done —

"A good song, friend, and well sung; yet methinks thou must be foolish to come and sing to us who are here, when we cannot reward you with even a meal such as a man might not be ashamed to offer to another."

"I sing to those whom I sing to," said the gleeman. "Shall I sing you another song?" and Wulnoth nodded —

"Ay, for even a song may drive away gloom, friend," he said. "Sing, if thou wilt sing without hope of reward."

"Nay, then I cannot sing, for I look for great reward," was the answer he received. "But I know that I shall obtain that reward, so now listen to my song."

Then he struck the harp again, and he sang, and Wulnoth opened his mouth in surprise, for the song was of him, and his love for Edgiva, and his finding of the Lord; and the Wanderer started up when the music ceased, and he cried —

"By that Lord Whom thou hast said that I serve, thou knowest far too much, my friend; for there are but two who knew of this, and one is by my side."

"And the other stands before thee, Wanderer," came the voice of the King. And at that the two started up bewildered —

"Alfred!" they cried. And the gleeman answered —

"Even so, my friends. Now, you two tarry here, for I am content. If ye, who know me well, fail to recognize me, there is little fear that my foes will do so."

"But where goest thou, O King?" they asked. And he answered that he was going to the camp of the Danes. But at that the two looked grave, for of a truth the danger was great, and did the King fail in deceiving the foe, there would be no more mercy for him than there had been for Edmund of East Anglia.

But the King laughed away their fears, and made them promise to abide where they were.

"If messengers come," he said, "receive the messages, and bid them go back and prepare, and within two weeks shall word come to them. Then, when once the word comes, they must hasten. They must move so swiftly that the grass bends not beneath their feet; for then will it be that we must strike a swift blow at the very heart of our foe."

"You feel that you must do this thing, O King?" asked Osric, and the King made answer that it must be done.

"By now will they have heard of the destruction of their fleet," he said, "and that of itself must needs make them come to some speedy decision; and what the decision is, I must find out."

So they had no more words to say, feeling that much was at stake; and Alfred, taking his harp, went

away and set face boldly towards the camp of the Danes.

And when he got nigh, he struck his harp and began to sing, and he sang the song of the bear jarl, whose son was Beorn, and the vikings gathered round him, for they loved the gleeman's songs.

And Alfred noticed all that could be seen, and how the camp was far more badly kept than it should have been; for these Danes were so confident now, that they forgot their caution; and he sang again and again, and presently a messenger came from Guthrun, asking who it was that made music in the camp.

Then when the chief was told, he commanded that the gleeman be brought before him, and made to sing against his singers; and Alfred was taken to the hall where the holdas sat.

There was Guthrun, as hearty as ever, and there was Hungwar, and he looked fiercer and wilder than of yore; and Guthrun cried to the disguised King.

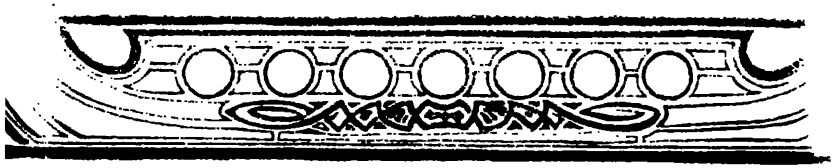
"How now, Saxon, dost value thy life so little, that thou dost come hither?"

Then Alfred answered, speaking in the tones of an old man —

"Now, chief, that is a poor saying; for of a truth a gleeman knows no country or race, but sings of the brave wherever he finds them. Moreover, it is but natural that I should come."

"And wherefore?" demanded the chief.

"First, because I have heard of thy Danish gleemen, and I wish to hear their cunning playing; and



secondly, because, Saxon or Dane, men must eat; and since thou hast left us little, to whom but thee can we come for food?"

Then did the Danes laugh loud and long, for it pleased them to hear this of their doings, seeing that if there was no food in the land, the people must soon be starved into submission, and Alfred would not be able to muster any more men; and so they bade the henchmen give the harper food, and after that they set him to play against their own men.

But Alfred was cunning; and though he was a musician far beyond the best of the Danes, he let them play the best, lest he make them envious and so be dismissed.

And that also pleased the holdas; and presently Hungwar bent forward to him, and cried fiercely —

"Little canst thou play, old man. Thou art not fit to be called a gleeman beside the singers of Denmark. Now see if thou canst sing a song of Regner Lodbrok; and if thou canst not, then by Thor thou shalt sing thine own death-song."

"That is a hard saying to hearten a man for his work, chief," answered the gleeman, "yet I will try my best."

Then he struck his harp afresh, and he sang the song of Regner Lodbrok and his slaying of the dragon; and he sang so well that all applauded him, and some pulled their massive bracelets off and cast them to him for his reward; and Hungwar himself said that the gleeman might stay in the camp and sing to the

soldiers, seeing that they had little to occupy their time while they were waiting for news from the laggards who had sailed with the fleet.

Now that told Alfred that the tidings of the defeat had not yet arrived, and he was the more anxious to stay there; for he desired to learn what the chiefs would do when they heard the news.

And into the camp he went with the vikings; and not one there even dreamed that beneath the ragged clothes and feeble form the King of Wessex was hidden. And Alfred saw the whole camp, and heard the talk of the vikings; and sometimes he sat in the lower part of the hall while the soldiers feasted, and he heard the chiefs talking of their plans.

And the fourth day while he thus sat, there came a horseman, all spent with his journey and covered with dust; and when he entered the hall, he cried aloud, without even giving greeting —

"Evil tidings, chiefs, are mine to tell. Evil and black tidings. The fleet is destroyed, and the warriors are slain, and the banner of Regner Lodbrok is taken."

Then a great hush fell on all there; and men looked from one to another in dismay; for worse to them than the loss of the fleet, was the loss of the banner, which they supposed had been blest by the gods, and which always led them to victory.

And then did Hungwar start up and cry aloud —

"Now evil was it that I suffered the banner to go with Hubba my brother; and if he recover it not again,

then we twain will have a word to say and a deed to do together when we meet."

"Speak no evil of Hubba," answered the messenger. "For him the death-song has been sung; and he died as a hero should die; and also Biorn Ironside has gone to the storm-land with him."

"Hubba dead and Biorn dead," said Guthrun. "Now truly thy tidings are heavy."

"Think not of them. Not of the dead, but of the banner, must we think," cried Hungwar fiercely. "Blood, and much blood, must flow for this. Who led the foe, man? Not this King of Wessex, whom we have hunted for, and who has disappeared as though the earth had swallowed him?"

"Two jarls led the foe," the man answered, "and mighty warriors both. One Borric, an Ealdorman of the south —"

"Borric shall die," cried Hungwar. "Who the other?"

"A mighty man whom men call the Wanderer. He who once was in thy service. He struck down thy brother, and he took the banner away."

Then did Hungwar turn pale for the moment, for he thought that this was the work of the evil spirits helping Wulnoth; and he cried madly, gnashing his teeth, and clenching his fists —

"Evil, evil, upon him, and evil the day when I saw him before me and suffered him to live. Guthrun, we must march. We must pursue this man, and take the banner back. Not a girl in Denmark but would

scorn us for nithings, did we return without it, and without having avenged the slight done to it."

"In that I am with thee, Hungwar," replied Guthrun. "But march whither? We must know where the man is before we can pursue him."

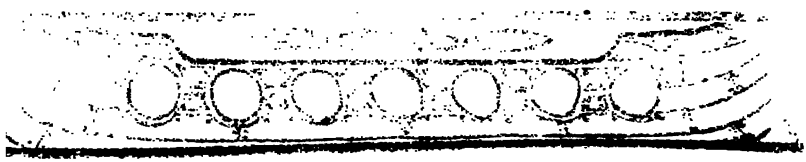
"I will burn down every dwelling, I will slay every living soul, till I find him," answered Hungwar; "and for this Wanderer, no jarl he, but a thrall; and when I catch him, he shall die the most terrible death that I can think of."

"Now, not so," said Guthrun firmly. "Thou art angry, Hungwar, and no wonder, and for that reason thou speakest thus. Be the man jarl or thrall, he is a hero and a warrior, and must be treated as such. A hero, be he of the foe even, deserves a hero's death."

"Wait thou and see," answered Hungwar fiercely. "Oh! I would that I might have him face to face alone! I would repay all then."

"We must send messengers and recall all the bands," Guthrun said. "We must foray, and secure plenty of provisions. For a week or a fortnight we must tarry here, and make preparations; and then we will advance, and put the matter to the test, and everywhere proclaim that until the banner of Regner is delivered to us again, we will harry the country far and wide."

At this all the vikings shouted; and drawing their swords waved them in the air. Yet the spirits of the Danes were cast down, and they were as men bewildered; and Guthrun himself, when he was alone,



sat with clouded brow, and pondered, and his thoughts were strange thoughts —

For Guthrun had heard the story of the White Christ; and now he wondered, seeing that Odin's Raven was captured, and Odin had not smitten the men who had carried it away, whether, after all, the Saxon God was not stronger than the gods of the Northland.

Guthrun had not forgotten the slaying of Edmund the King, and the thoughts which that brought to him often troubled him. Presently Guthrun was to do as Wulnoth had done, and acknowledge that the Lord was of all lords the chief.

And that night the Saxon gleeman was missing from the camp of the Danes; and when none could find him, the rumor went abroad that he had been no gleeman, but a spy amongst them; and that did but trouble them the more.

And not long afterwards Alfred the King was back with Wulnoth and Osric, and to them he said —

"Now has the time come, my friends, and the foe are dismayed by reason of the loss of their ships! Hasten, both, and send others on; and through the land let the summons go that all who love me, and would strike for freedom, shall hasten hither without delay. Hasten, for all now depends upon our being ready to smite our enemy ere they have time to decide what they will do."

Now, this is how King Alfred spied out the Danish camp, and how he sent Wulnoth and Osric to summon his forces to his aid.

CHAPTER XXII

The Battle of Ethandune

FAST and hard did Wulnoth and Osric ride on the King's bidding; and as they went, they sent other trusty messengers on in different directions; and ere long the people began to come, every man with his weapons, and most of them warriors hardened in many a hard-fought battle; and all hailed the King with joy, and looked forward eagerly to meeting their foes on the field of slaughter once more.

And there came Abbot Hugoline — for Bishop Eadred had gone north to seek to bring the men of Mercia and those of Northumbria to combine with Wessex.

And each day did they in the King's camp gather, and unite in praying to God for victory; while the King proclaimed that only those who were good men and true, and faithful to the Church, should remain; for he

said that 't were better to fight with a few upon whom they might look for God's blessing, than with many who could only expect His anger.

And the first care of the King was to make entrenchments great and strong around his old camping ground at Athelney; for to this spot he saw he would have to retreat did the fortune of war go against him; and this time it would have to be with all his force, since if once the army disbanded, it would be gathered no more.

Here, too, he gathered great store of food and weapons, and gave the command to one of his thanes and to a small body of hardened warriors. "This stronghold must be kept at all costs," he said, "for not only will it be our retreat in case of need, but while it is held, the Danes will fear to move far. They know not how many or how few are here. If they come against it, then will I and the army fall upon them from their rear; and if they abide and await us, then can those here sally out and help us when we meet them in the field."

Longer did it take the King than he had thought, to complete this work; yet, as if to aid him, the Danes still remained in their camp, for they were uncertain, and their counsels were divided.

Then, Athelney being strengthened, King Alfred, with whom now were all the men of Somerset, marched northward and encamped at Egbert's Stone, which was on the borders of Selwood Forest, which they of Wales called *coit mawr*, or the great forest. And here with

great rejoicing, and with prayer, the King's banner was once more unfurled; and once more he found himself at the head of a force which was equal to that of their cruel foe; while each day more men came hastening to join him; and all over the Westland the tidings flew, and men threw aside their work, and seized their war gear, and refeathered their arrows, and set out to go to the King's aid.

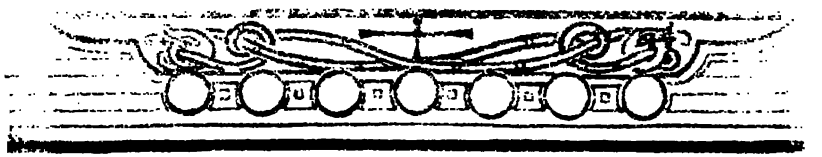
And all old quarrels were forgotten; and they who had been foes became friends, and each stood for all, and all for each, as Englishmen should; and the King saw that the cause which had weakened the English in the past was now removed, and his heart beat high with hope and joy.

Then, when all the forces were collected, for two days did the King tarry at Egbert's Stone, and made preparation for the march and the fight; and hither came the Queen and Osburga; and with them Edgiva the Beautiful, so that for a brief space Wulnoth was with his love again.

And he took her little hands in his strong palms, and he gazed into her beautiful face, and told her how he also had found the White Christ, and how he understood Wyborga's thorn-crowned cross at last.

"Not yet has the Abbot baptized me," he said, "but when this fight is over, that will be done; and then, my Princess, the King having his crown secure, must I set forth on my wanderings once more, and seek for thy noble brother, my friend and Prince."

And to that Edgiva answered gently —



"The Lord guide thee, my Wulnoth, as He has guided thee to the light, and when thy task is over, then be sure that be thou thrall or be thou thane, Edgiva will give thee thy reward, and be joyful in the doing of it."

Little time was there for love speaking now, for all was hurry; and the royal ladies having retired with their train, the King gave orders on the morning of the third day, and the army marched eastward, and encamped that night on a lofty hill, from the slopes of which they could see afar the camp of the Danes.

For Guthrun and Hungwar, alarmed at the tidings they received of how the King of the West Saxons was advancing against them with a host, had hastily broken their old camp and advanced to meet him, travelling swiftly so that they might be beyond the reach of those left at Athelney; and now they were encamped in a strong place, with earthworks thrown up, to which they might retire if the fight went against them, and there hold out till more came to rescue them.

So the night through, the forces remained; and in the Danish camp was heard the sound of wild revelry, but in the Saxon army the voice of prayer; and in the morning the King advanced to a place called Ethandune, and there the Danes came to meet him, now, alas! with no raven banner floating over them.

Woe, woe, for the Danes! Woe for the daughters of Regner Lodbrok who had woven that banner in a single night! Woe to the sons of the Northland, for great was to be the slaughter that day.

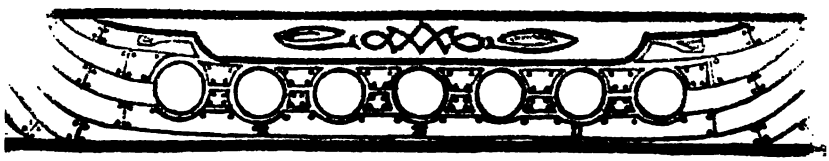
And the King drew up his army in battle array, and he sat his steed, and spoke to them, and urged them to be of good courage and each one play a man's part.

"My dear subjects and fellow countrymen," he said, "this day is a day big with fate, and England calls to each of her sons to be a hero. Yonder are the Black Strangers who would trample out the church of the Lord, and put the priests and the holy maidens to shame and death. Yonder are the murderers of little children and gray-heads, yonder the spoilers of your homes. Is it not said that they who slay with the sword shall by the sword be slain? Ye are as the arm of the Lord this day. Up and smite them, and may His blessing be on our fair England, on this day of battle."

Then did the battle begin; and the Saxon archers stood forward, and shot thick and fast, and their bows were like the bow of Einar Tamberskelver who fought with King Olaf in his last fight, and their arrows like the bite of serpents, so that the Danes fell fast, and cried to their leaders to hasten forward, that they might get at the Saxons with sword and axe.

And then, as the Danes began to charge, the archers stepped back, and the spears of the champions were hurled, and the Danes were smitten again, for the Saxons could cast as well as they could shoot, and there were men of the Britons with the King also, who could cast right hand or left.

Thus it was that ere the Black Strangers reached the King's lines, the death-song had been sung for many a viking warrior; for there were thoughts of



wrongs received, and vengeance desired, which made the Saxon arm strong, and sent the spears like the lightning stroke, piercing armor and shields.

And then the war game and the man's game began in good earnest, and the King cried to his army to go forward down the slope on which they stood, and meet the charge; and the war-horns sounded, and the English war-cry rolled to the air, affrighting even the eagles who came to the slaughter; and rank met rank, and the thirsty land drank deep its fill of red blood.

Now Guthrun had taken the old Danish plan of forming his men wedge-shaped, and seeking to drive them into the heart of the Saxon ranks, and to cast them into disorder. But Wulnoth knew of that plan, for he had so fought himself in the old days; and he had spoken to the King of a way to thwart it, and turn it to account — and thus did he and Osric, one on either side.

Each had a chosen band, and each formed his men into the wedge, and at the point of either wedge was Osric and Wulnoth, one at each. They stood back hidden by the host, until Guthrun's warriors made their attack, and then they thundered out one on either side, and they smote the Danish wedge, and pierced it through and through, and broke the ranks and scattered the warriors, and gave them as prey to the sword and the axe; and there was no mercy asked, and no mercy given, for Dane and Saxon were alike minded to make an end of the matter.

Woe for the Danes that day, for many of their

mightiest leaders were slain, and sore Guthrun longed for the strong Hubba and the wise Ironbeard, and for Halfdane the Fierce, who had gone northward.

Yet heroes were the holdas, and valiant deeds did they do; and many a good Saxon fell, and his bones are still far beneath the green fields which now grow o'er that field of slaughter.

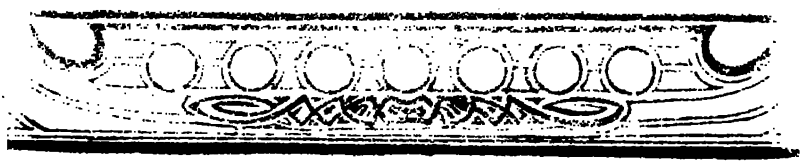
Here raged Hungwar like a berserker, and ever towards him did Wulnoth strive, and ever did it seem as if some invisible power kept them sundered.

And there fought Guthrun, his eyes flashing, his teeth gnashing, wielding his man-feller, a great iron mace fully twenty pounds' weight, beneath whose blows the stoutest helm cracked like a nutshell, and the strongest fell as the ox falls in the shambles.

And there, too, was a young holda, Hastings by name, who in after years spread fire and sword through the land; and grim old Harold Blackfang, and Forkbeard the One-eyed, and many a mighty one who played the man's game with fierce joy, and piled the slain high along his path.

But the Saxons were mighty also, and the King was where the battle was thickest, and with him Osric, and Ethelred, and Borric, and Abbot Hugoline clad in war gear and doing his part like a man and hero; and with them many a noble thane, and many a seth-cundman; and each did mighty deeds that day, and made the sword sing a good song, and drove the vikings before them like sheep.

For the Danes had grown over-confident, and had



given their time to the wine horn, and had neglected their war tools in peace time; and now, instead of shrieking women and fleeing churls, they had men burning with the memories of many wrongs endured, and determined to wipe the stain of the invader from English ground.

Backward and forward did the fight sway, and none would yield; and the leaders called to encourage their men, and plunged into the peril heedlessly; and so, for two long hours did the war game go, and then, sullenly but surely, the Danes were driven back, and the Saxons pressed on with shouts of victory, while thousands lay there gasping their life away, or still in the death-sleep.

And now again did Wulnoth rage like a lion; and he shouted to Hungwar to stay and meet him face to face; but Hungwar only glared at him, and slew those near, showing his teeth like an old she-bear when she stands over her cub.

"Press on, press on," cried the King. "The victory is ours. One more good stroke, a strong stroke, and they flee. Press on, my men, for our dear Lord, and for England."

Then, led by the King himself, and by Hugoline, the Saxons charged, and the Danes broke and fled, though Guthrun cried aloud and beat his breast in his grief; and though Hungwar smote down his own men, when they turned their backs to the foe.

But there was no staying them, for their hearts were gone, and they said that now the Raven Banner

was gone, Odin fought for them no more; and so, pursued by the victorious Saxons, they, who had never fled, now ran like the flock before the sheep-dogs; and the leaders and the holdas were borne along with them, grief torturing their hearts, and shame on their faces; and thus they were chased even to their very camp; and then King Alfred gave the signal and ordered the pursuit to cease, for he saw that there was danger, and that the soldiers might fall into a trap did they go on.

And outside the camp Wulnoth stood, his axe on his shoulder, all jagged and notched, and covered with a dreadful hue; and he cried aloud to the fleeing Danes, and said —

"Ho! sons of Odin, why flee ye so swiftly? Tell ye that one desires to speak with the son of Regner. Long this day have I sought him, yet with no avail; and now I would meet him and give him greeting, and send him on that journey on which I have sent his brother, Hubba."

So he shouted, and the vikings hung their heads, and muttered that it was shame that the son of Regner did not go out and meet this champion; but Hungwar heeded not, and only said that he could wound Wulnoth more surely in another way.

And on the steep mounds he stood, and answered, and called Wulnoth the shameless son of a thrall.

"See, thou Wanderer, what a dainty prize I have here!" he cried. "I sold the brother into slavery; and the sister shall be my maiden now." And then,

to Wulnoth's dismayed eyes, there appeared Edgiva, held by two rude vikings.

He uttered a loud cry of dismay and rage, and would have started forward; but Edgiva held out her hands and called to him, and said —

"Fear nothing, Wulnoth, my love. The Lord Who has given victory to the King, will preserve me. Go back now and tell the King that the Queen and the noble Osburga are safe, and Wyborga is unharmed. Only I was taken, for I was hastening to the field of slaughter, to see if I might be of service in tending the wounded; and I fell in with a band of the enemy, who seized me and brought me hither. Yet Guthrun will not let this man slay me."

"How will Guthrun prevent me?" roared Hungwar fiercely. And to that Guthrun himself answered —

"I will prevent thee with my life; for of a truth this is but a nithing thing to do. There shall no harm come to the lady." Then he added in low tones, "Thou fool, seest thou not that if we do this wrong, nothing can save our lives? and if I must die, it shall not be with this nithing thing against my name!"

And then Wulnoth spoke again and he said —

"Hearken to me, Guthrun, you who once called me a true man; and you, all ye vikings and holdas of Denmark. 'T is true I am a thrall, in so far as my father was called thrall by the false son of noble Cerdic. But of Cerdic's blood am I also; and that is as high as the blood of Regner Lodbrok. Now, this is my word. Alfred the King of Wessex has told me

how Hungwar boasted that he wished he could meet me face to face, we two alone; for Alfred was that Saxon gleeman, O Guthrun."

"By my beard, 't is good for him we knew it not, or he would not have beaten us to-day, Wanderer," replied Guthrun. "But go on, say thou what thou hast to say."

"This I say then," Wulnoth continued. "Hungwar desired to see me; and, moreover, he has many debts to pay to me. That scar on his face I put there, I a boy, and with only a broken sword, when he was clad in war-gear and fully armed. Ay, and I had surely made an end of him then, had not the viking Wahrmund struck me down. I have taken his father's banner, I have slain his brother Hubba, surely he owes me a debt —"

"He does, indeed," cried the vikings who listened.

"And I will give him chance of paying me in full," Wulnoth said. "To-morrow I will come and meet him, he and I alone; and some from your camp and some from ours shall abide, to witness the fight. If he make an end of me, well — then must Edgiva mourn; but if I make an end of him, then my word is, let the maid be delivered up to me as my prize, for mine she is, and none but a nithing would have stolen her."

"Now," cried Guthrun, "this must be, Hungwar. Thou hast heard his speech, and if thou dost refuse, not a warrior but will call thee nithing, and thy own people will cast thee out. Surely the thing must be, Hungwar."

"The thing must be!" cried the vikings, and Hungwar glared and laughed. "I ask nothing better," he said. "To-morrow, boaster, I will slay thee."

"To-morrow we will see who has been boasting," answered Wulnoth. "Guthrun, thou art noble of heart, though thou art our foe. To thee I trust Edgiva my beloved."

"She shall suffer no harm while I live," answered Guthrun; and Wulnoth waved his hand and departed, and went back to tell the King how Edgiva was held prisoner. And Guthrun took Edgiva and gave her into charge of his wife, and set a guard at the door of her tent, and so kept he his word to Wulnoth.

Now, this is how the host of the Danes were defeated at Ethandune, and how the field of slaughter was left to the Saxons, and this is how Edgiva was seen by Wulnoth in the Danish camp, and how Wulnoth challenged Hungwar to holmgang with him, and Guthrun promised to protect Edgiva the Beautiful.

CHAPTER XXIII

How Hungwar was slain, and the Danes became Christians

NOW, on the morning following the battle, Wulnoth rose and donned his war gear, and took his shield and his axe; and he girded on the great sword which he had found amongst the ashes in ruined Lethra, and set forth for the Danish camp; and with him went the King, and many a thane, and a great following of the soldiers.

And to meet them came Guthrun and his holdas, and the Danish vikings; and a truce was proclaimed, and death pronounced upon any man of either camp who drew sword or made brawl that day.

And with Guthrun was brought Edgiva the Beautiful, guarded by the vikings, and as the prisoner of Hungwar the son of Regner Lodbrok.

And Guthrun greeted the King as one brave soldier should greet another, and he said —

"O King, thou who wast brave enough to come alone to my camp, had I found thee then, surely I had slain thee; but if thou come to-day, thou shalt be my guest, and with my own life will I defend thee."

And Alfred answered him with courteous words, and said that could they only be at peace, they might be good friends, and feast together often.

Then did Osric stand forward, and make proclamation, and say that Wulnoth the Wanderer declared Hungwar the son of Regner Lodbrok to be nithing and coward, and slayer of bound men, and torturer of women and children, and that he challenged him to battle alone, with none to help either. And this was to be the condition of the fight — that if Hungwar conquered Wulnoth, then he should have his life to keep or to take as he chose, and he should receive again the Raven Banner, and Edgiva should be his to sell or to keep. But if Wulnoth conquered, then Edgiva should be given back to freedom to do as she list, and Hungwar's life should belong to Wulnoth.

And the Danes and Saxons said ay to this, and swore to observe the conditions; and then all men drew back, and looked on breathlessly, and the two champions in their armor, and holding shield and axe, advanced and stood alone. And Wulnoth said —

"At last, Hungwar! At last we meet, and I have lived for this, these many years."

"And thou wilt rue it forever after," was the grim answer. "With this axe will I slay thee."

"Seest thou this sword, Hungwar?" laughed

Wulnoth. "I picked it from the ruins of Lethra, and I have kept it for this day. It has wearied waiting for a song to sing, and thou canst guess what song that will be, and whose it will be. So now let us make an end of the matter, for speech is for women, and deeds are for men."

So they drew near, and all there wondered how this fight would go. For though Hungwar was older than Wulnoth, he had the strength of ten; and his great muscles stood up in masses upon his arms, and with his grizzled hair and flowing beard and moustache, he looked like Thor himself in his might.

And from his parted lips his teeth showed yellow and black, like fangs; and his bloodshot eyes rolled angrily; yet deep in his heart was there a black fear, for he dreaded Wulnoth more than a score of champions.

And the Wanderer looked strong and mighty, and his face was full of joy light; for was he not fighting for the freedom of his Princess, and now avenging the wrongs done to her brother, and her father, and his own father and mother?

"Art ready, Hungwar?" he asked, and Hungwar growled, "I am weary of waiting," and smote at him a mighty blow, that seemed as if nought could turn it aside.

But Wulnoth caught it on his shield; and then he struck in turn, and Hungwar caught his blow and was unharmed.

Then like circles of light did the axes swing and play, and the blows fell fast, and the shields groaned

and shivered; and at last Hungwar's split in twain, though it was of stoutest oak, and lined with triple leather, and studded with massive bosses.

And when Wulnoth saw that, he swung his axe upwards with all his might, and cut clean through the handle of Hungwar's weapon, as he had cut through the handle of his mace in the long past; and then he cast aside his own axe and shield, and drew the great sword with the blue-veined steel blade; and he laughed aloud, though his breath came in deep gasps, so hard had he labored.

"Now, Hungwar, now we have finished this child's play with shield and axe; now draw thy sword and let us have a good song."

But Hungwar never answered; only he looked into Wulnoth's face with eyes of hate, which were yet eyes of fear; for he who had never feared death, now feared, not the dying, but the man by whom death was to come.

"The maiden will be freed," said the vikings to each other. "There is a shadow on the spirit of Hungwar, and the Valkyres tarry for him."

And Hungwar drew his sword and advanced, and now it was a man's game, indeed; for Hungwar's shield was broken, and Wulnoth had cast his aside, and the great blades must be sword and shield alike.

They clashed together, and the sparks flew as from a smith's anvil; and each champion strove, his eye fixed on his foe; and each knew that death was near.

"By Thor!" growled Guthrun, "'t is a mighty

fight, and one that it does a man good to see. They are champions both." And to that a holda said —

"Ay, for Hungwar is fighting for life, and Wulnoth is fighting for love; and methinks that love will win."

And presently Hungwar's sword was smitten from his hand, and all looked for Wulnoth to make an end. But he cast aside his own sword, and with his bare hands he gripped his foe; and they two strained and swayed in their efforts; and Hungwar grinned in rage to think that Wulnoth was putting him to shame by thus refusing to take advantage of him; and in their struggling the berserker rage came upon him, and he bent forward and gashed Wulnoth's cheek with his fangs, crying —

"A mark for a mark, Wanderer."

"And a dog's death for a mad dog who bites," cried Wulnoth angrily; and he put out all his strength, — the strength which Osth the giant had taught him — and he squeezed and squeezed, and Hungwar gasped, and smote blindly with his fists, and his lips parted, and the foam came from them, and it was tinged with blood.

And Wulnoth squeezed yet harder, and the muscles gave, and the great bones yielded, and the ribs snapped; and Hungwar gave a gasp and became limp, so that Wulnoth cast him helpless to the earth, and knelt beside him.

"There, son of Regner!" he cried. "I have beaten thee with but my bare hands. Now dost thou yield to me and sue for life?"

"Thus do I yield," answered Hungwar; and he raised himself and he plucked a knife from his girdle where he had hidden it, though they had agreed that they would wear no daggers, and he struck a bitter blow at Wulnoth.

The Wanderer sprang back only just in time, and even so the knife left a crimson trail on his brown arm; and he seized his sword from where he had flung it down.

"I swore to slay thee with this," he cried; "and yet but now I thought to spare thee, seeing that I have shamed thee who hast bitten like a dog and stabbed in secret like a nithing. It is thy fate, and thou shalt have it. Die, Hungwar, and go to thy brother. This is for my father and mother, and for Edgiva and Guthred, and for their father, the King of Lethra. Thus is the debt paid and the story ended." And with that he smote, and Hungwar the mighty viking lord fell back slain.

Then did Alfred speak with Guthrun and ask him whether he would yield; and Guthrun said nay, but that he would go back to his camp and make the best stand that he might.

And Edgiva the Beautiful was set free; and she thanked Guthrun for his kindness, and went back with Wulnoth and the King; while the vikings took up the body of Hungwar and buried it nigh that place, and raised a mound over it, and sang his death-song with dark and gloomy hearts.

Now, back in his camp, Guthrun thought dark

thoughts, for his heart was heavy, and he saw not what to do. And the Saxon King placed men all round, so that none might come in and none might go out; and so for a fortnight did things stand, and there was no food amongst the Danes, and they tasted of the hunger which they had so often made others endure.

Each day did the Saxon King send and ask them whether they would yield to him, and each day they sent back an answer that they would not. But Alfred made no attempt to attack them, for he knew that hunger must do its work in the end.

And at the end of that fortnight Guthrun called a great meeting of all his warriors, and asked them what should be done —

"We wait in vain for aid," he said, "and this Alfred grows in power each day. Men have wearied of our cruelty and hate us for our deeds; and methinks sometimes that I hate myself for having taken part in some things that have gone. Now, what can we do? We can stay till hunger slays us — but that is not a warrior's death."

"We can go forth sword in hand and die like heroes," said one holda; and the others nodded.

"That is a hero death," Guthrun said, "but it is death, and life is sweet."

"We may not go back to the Northland with this shame tale," said another. "Landless and nameless should we then be, and all men would scoff at us."

"This England is a fair land, and plenteous," said Guthrun, "and here it would be good to stay."

"And here we cannot stay, unless it be in the death-sleep," was the reply he received.

"Softly," he replied. "Here we can abide as Alfred's thanes. If we swear obedience to him, he will give us land, and we can live in peace; and that is better than this perpetual slaying and harrying, and better than being slain."

Then the holdas were silent, and they pondered; and at last one said gravely —

"Now, Guthrun, the matter is thus. Alfred may do as thou sayest if we are Christians; but Alfred will not do so if we are worshippers of our gods. For myself," and he laughed bitterly, "I care little what gods I worship, and the gods of our land have failed us."

Now again all the holdas bent their brows and thought. And Guthrun spoke and said that long he had pondered this thing; and that he felt that the gods of the Northland were no gods, but only the creatures of sagas; but that the Lord Christ was a God indeed, who had been on earth amongst men, and had been spoken with.

And he told them how the maiden Edgiva had spoken with him concerning the matter; and how she had said that Wulnoth the Wanderer was a Christian. And he had determined to abide by the issue of the fight; and to say that did Wulnoth conquer, then the Lord Christ was the true God; and that if Hungwar conquered, that the gods of the Northland were the mightier.

"Ye know how the fight went," he said — "how

Hungwar was shamed, and broken, and slain. To my mind, the Christians' God is the true God; and if Alfred will but make terms with us, and accept our service, I, for my part, am right ready to accept the faith of this land and remain here in peace."

Then rose one old graybeard of a warrior, and he spoke, leaning on his axe, and his voice was deep and full, and he said —

"What is life, O holdas? We know not. Nor know we what death is, whether it be a beginning or an end. Whence come we? We know not; nor know we whither we go, beyond the wild dreams of the ancient times. 'T is as when we sit around the welcome fire in the dark winter, and without the tempest roars. Lo, through the window a little bird comes, storm-driven and nigh perished; and for a little space it flutters in the light and warmth, and then flies out into the darkness again. So are we. For a little space we are here — we came from a darkness of which we know nothing; and presently the death-song is sung, and into the darkness we go again. Now, O holdas, if this Christian creed can tell us aught of the darkness, and make our pathway light, then I say it is a good religion, and one for men to think of; and I for one say Skoal to the Lord Christ if this be so." [1]

Long and earnestly did the Danes ponder; and finally Guthrun himself went to King Alfred, and spoke

[1] Although I have used it in my story, this beautiful reference was not made at this time. It was really spoken two hundred and fifty years before, on the introduction of Christianity into England.

with him, saying that for a man to change his religion simply to save his life was a poor thing, and that he and his must know what they did, ere they accepted the Lord Christ for their God.

And then did the King rejoice, not only because he was glad that the Danes should become Christians, but also because it helped him from a hard problem. For, though he had conquered the Danes, he saw not how to utterly make an end of them and drive them out; and if they would stay and be his servants, then they would be of help to him indeed.

So he talked long with Guthrun, and he sent priests and learned men to converse with the holdas; and the end of the matter was that Guthrun and all his host said that they would put aside their gods, and become Christians.

And then there was rejoicing throughout the land; and on one day the host were baptized, and Wulnoth and Guthrun at the same time, and King Alfred became their godfather and sponsor; and together did they kneel and receive blessing, and swear to live to the honor of Christ the Lord.

Then did King Alfred give broad lands to the Danes; and those lands in part which were most open to attack from other invaders. East Anglia and part of Mercia did fall to their lot, and in the very place where they had carried fire and sword and slaughtered King Edmund, did Guthrun build churches and walk in God's way.

And these lands which the King gave to Guthrun,

together with the land of Northumbria, became known as the Danelagh; and so it continued for many years.

And of Guthrun but little more is said; only this, that during the rest of his life he faithfully kept his promise, and never rebelled against Alfred the King, but ruled his people wisely, and was the King's liegeman and friend.

Now, this is how Wulnoth went holmgang with Hungwar the Dane, and slew him, and set Edgiva the Beautiful free; and this is how Guthrun and his host turned to the Lord Christ, and dwelt in the Danelagh.

CHAPTER XXIV

How Wulnoth met with Guthred again

NOW, after these things Wulnoth pondered long in his mind, for he was anxious to set out again to seek Prince Guthred if still he might be alive, and yet he knew not where, in all the wide world, he should seek.

Nor could Wyborga help him, for now she was very old and feeble, and she lived in one of the holy houses, and rarely saw strangers.

But once Wulnoth saw her and asked her whither he should go; and Wyborga told him to wait patiently and to take the first duty that should come, and then the way should be revealed to him.

"Indeed, my Princess and sweet love," Wulnoth said to Edgiva when they talked of this thing, "I am rather tried about this matter. In the past thy brother put this promise upon me and I gave it right willingly; but here from boyhood to manhood have I grown, and

I do not even know if he may be alive. I am minded sometimes to give up this, and to take the joy which thou dost hold out to me, if still a royal princess will marry one who is nameless."

"Now, *nameless!*" laughed Edgiva proudly. "Whose name is better known than that of Wulnoth; and has not the King given thee broad lands for thine own?"

"And I am going wandering again, and leaving them for any to do as they like with."

"Nay, thou hast friends in plenty, who will look to thy possessions if thou art away. My rede is this, Wulnoth; wait till the next duty comes, as Wyborga has counselled thee, and then, if nothing comes of it, I will say that thou hast searched faithfully, and that thou canst, without shame, rest from thy labors, as from a hopeless task."

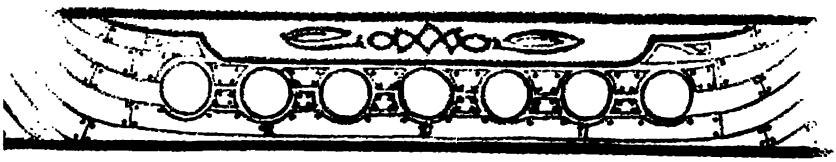
"So be it, dear love," Wulnoth answered. "Thou hast never counselled me wrongly yet, and by thy rede will I abide."

Now, not long after this the King sent to call Wulnoth to his side, and he spake to him and said —

"Now, Wulnoth, my faithful friend, I have a task for thee." And Wulnoth said gleefully —

"That is good hearing, King, for a man grows rusty quickly if he be not at work."

"Little fear of Wulnoth growing rusty," laughed the King, "for he is forever anxious to be doing. But listen, friend. This is the burden of it. Thou knowest that in Northumbria there have ever been troubles, for the people there quarrel amongst themselves,



Northumbrians and Danes together. Now of late, Halfdane — ah! thou knowest him?"

"Right well, King," answered Wulnoth grimly. "Well, what of him?"

"This Halfdane gained all power in Northumbria, and he and his barbarians ruled as with rods of iron. Now tidings have come that Halfdane is dead."

"Dead!" cried Wulnoth. "So much the worse! I thought perchance that it was to slay him thou wouldst have me go."

"What a warrior art thou, Wulnoth! thou wouldst go against a host and laugh at it! Nay, Halfdane is dead — slain by one of his own holdas in a drunken brawl. Now the people of Northumbria are divided and have no leader. The Danes have none they can place at their head without endless quarrels following, and the Northumbrians have no king either. Now, this is my desire, that thou speed north to Bishop Eadred, and urge him to seek for a chieftain to be their king — one who will be of the Christian faith, and who will be true to me so that I have no cause to fear war in the north.

"Mercia has acknowledged me, and the Welsh are content that I should be their champion against the Danes, from whom they have suffered much. Cantua has no power now, and East Anglia is held by Guthrun for me. London welcomes me, and if the North be but friendly, then all England will be as one, and we can bend all our thoughts towards resisting any fresh attacks from the Danes — for more are certain to come ere long."

"So long as there are vikings in Denmark, and ships to sail the sea, they will come," answered Wulnoth. "Well, O King, I will do thy bidding and seek out the Bishop."

"Methinks," said the King slowly, "I might do worse than try to have thee made king there." But to that Wulnoth answered quickly —

"Nay, nay, Alfred, that may not be. I am no kingly man. I should rule by hard blows, and have no head for the business of state. Each man to his own trade, O King, and mine is fighting — not ruling and law making."

"Perchance thou art right, Wulnoth," the King answered. "Thou art wise at any rate, for 't is no light task to be a king."

"And no king do I desire to be," answered Wulnoth; and then he went in haste and bade adieu to Edgiva, and saddled his horse and started off with no better company than his sword and his axe, and his good shield slung at his back.

And from Wessex he rode northwards into Mercia, and there he met with King Guthrun, who had gone thither on business from East Anglia; and with the Dane he tarried a day and a night while his good steed rested.

Now, Wulnoth thought that perchance Guthrun might know something of what became of Guthred, and he asked him if he had ever heard the sons of Regner Lodbrok speak of the matter.

"Ay," answered Guthrun, "and I have often thought

that it was but a poor thing to sell a lad, and a king's son, into slavery, for that is what they did. I know not of a certainty, but I heard that the boy was sold to a Danish holda, who soon afterwards sailed for England in the days when the first invasion was. That is all I know. Most likely he has died long since."

"I fear that it must be so," sighed Wulnoth, and his heart felt sad as he thought of a king's son sold into such slavery. But then he thought of what Wyborga had said — how she had prophesied that he and the Prince and Edgiva should all meet again, and the Prince should reign in another land; and that seemed a very hard saying to him.

Well, after bidding farewell to Guthrun, Wulnoth resumed his journey and rode northwards; and everywhere he saw the tokens of the bad times that had been, for the land lay desolate and lonely, and there were no people to till it. And in those fields where the grass grew darkest and longest he knew that the war game had been played, and that the grass grew because men lay buried beneath.

For a great part of the way his road led through vast forests, of which many abounded in England in those days, or across wild and desolate plains and over steep rocky hills; and so he journeyed through the realm of Mercia and came at length into the confines of Northumbria. Here the signs of cruel war were even more frequent, and he passed whole towns which were only deserted, smoke-blackened ruins now, where

still the bones of men lay, picked clean by wild dogs or wolves.

Thus his road led, nor was it without adventure that he journeyed, for twice was he attacked by masterless men, and had to swing his axe and deal lusty blows ere he could pass on.

But such things troubled Wulnoth little, for the robbers were but half-hearted, as every one appeared to be, and trouble and dismay seemed everywhere.

"Now," thought Wulnoth to himself, "in sooth the King is wise. It would be a good thing to have a wise ruler here — one who would bring things to order again and lay the land under the plough. 'T is a shame to see it all idle like this, and makes a man feel that the war game is evil, and not good, no matter how it seems in the heat of the fight."

For two days Wulnoth rode, asking for tidings of the Bishop, and hearing from those who cared to return a civil answer — and that was not all — that he was still farther northward, seeking to lead the people to Christ.

Now it chanced, as he rode forward through a wood, that he suddenly heard the sounds of strife, and, putting spurs to his horse, he galloped forward, guided by the sounds, and came upon four masterless men — black-haired Danes every one — who had surrounded a man and were seeking to slay him, while he, with his back to a tree, flourished a long staff and kept them at bay.

"Hallo, nithings! rascals!" thundered Wulnoth as

he came upon the scene. "What, four to one, and he unarmed! Shame upon you! If you want to play that game, here is one who is ready for it." And with that he smote one knave a lusty blow and sent him sprawling, while the man cracked the pate of another, and the remaining pair ran away as fast as their legs could carry them.

"Thou art come in good time, friend," the man said, leaning on his staff and gazing at the Wanderer; and at the sound of that voice Wulnoth started and stared anxiously.

Poorly dressed was this man, and his brow was careworn, and around his neck he wore a thrall collar; but for all that, and for the many years which had passed, Wulnoth knew him — his heart went out, and recognized, and he felt, with wonder and thankfulness, that Wyborga's words had come true, and that he had found his friend the Prince.

"Thou art welcome, friend," he said; "by what name art thou called?"

"By the name of Gurth," was the answer, and Wulnoth laughed —

"That may be, but there are some in the world who know you by another name and would call you, not Gurth the Thrall, but Guthred the Prince."

Then did Guthred stare, and pass his hands across his brow, and say —

"Who art thou, stranger, who callest me by a name now long forgotten — so long forgotten, indeed, that it has almost passed from my memory?"

"Who am I?" cried Wulnoth. "I am one who made a promise and has been all his life trying to keep it — and now has found the chance. Guthred, my brother and my Prince, have you forgotten Wulnoth?"

"Wulnoth!" cried the other, trembling with emotion. "Wulnoth! Thou Wulnoth! Nay, I can see now. I can see the same bold yet kindly eyes, the same strong form! Wulnoth, my friend, my friend, at last thou hast come to cheer me in my loneliness!"

And then did these two embrace, and, though they were men grown, they shed tears. And they sat down side by side, and allowed the two wounded thieves to slip off, for, as Wulnoth said, they owed them a kindness, since had they not attacked Guthred he would never have found him.

And Wulnoth told all his story of his journeyings, and of the death of Hubba and Hungwar, and of how Edgiva was with Alfred the King, and old Wyborga still lived, though she was feeble and old. And Guthred told him of his sorrows and trials, and how his master had died and left him to his widow, and the old woman was cross and crabbed, and fond of beating her servants, so that ofttimes Guthred had been tempted to run away and become a masterless man himself.

"Yet I tarried, Wulnoth," he said, "for ofttimes I have dreamt that you would come; and I have seen a gray and noble-looking old man, who has placed a crown upon my head and hailed me king of the north."

"Now, that is passing strange!" mused Wulnoth, "and I remember how that Wyborga said that thou

shouldst become a king of a vaster kingdom than was Lethra. There is much to think of here, my friend — much that puzzles my comprehension and — "

But then a shrill voice broke upon their talk, and they saw a gaunt cross-looking old crone, clad in wealthy garments and being driven upon a mule through the wood.

"My mistress!" said Guthred in low tones, and Wulnoth thought of the neatherd's wife.

"There he is, the lazy rascal!" she cried. "Gossiping with a stranger instead of attending to his work. Thy back shall smart for this, sirrah, believe me, when thou art home."

"Now, nay, most beautiful lady," said Wulnoth; "the blame — if blame there be — is mine. Know that four knaves attacked thy servant, demanding that he give up thy property, which I see he carried at his girdle. And he defended himself in a most worthy way, though armed only with his stick, and I came to his aid and, as a reward, asked him to tell me of the whereabouts of Bishop Eadred."

"Beshrew Bishop Eadred — he makes men discontented and lazy with his talk of all being brethren. Still, he is a brave man, who keeps a bold front, let the danger be what it may. Now, as thou hast done me the service to preserve my slave and my money — like as not he would have run off with it and have joined the thieves himself — still, I say, since thou hast done this and hast, moreover, a civil tongue — a most uncommon thing amongst men in these days — therefore,

my man shall be thy guide and shall lead thee to the Bishop's dwelling if it will do thee service."

"Your goodness is indeed great, most dear lady," replied Wulnoth, "and I will humbly avail myself of it, and kiss my hand to you." And with that he beckoned to Guthred, saying aloud, "Come, knave, and rejoice that thou hast so good a mistress and one so fair."

Guthred followed, dumb with surprise, for the woman was most ill-favored; but when Wulnoth had ridden on in silence for a space, and they were safely out of sight and hearing, he looked round at his companion and then fell to laughing so much that he nigh rolled from his horse.

"Thou dost look surprised, dear friend," he said. "I almost laughed aloud before that old beldam when I caught sight of thy face."

"How didst thou learn such subtlety, Wulnoth?" asked Guthred. "'T is not as thou usedst to be."

"Marry! I learnt it from a neatherd in the South-land," answered Wulnoth, "and a king told me of it. Moreover, Guthred, many things have come true, and I have indeed helped to place that king's crown firmly upon his head, and I am his friend. And I think the rest shall come true also, for I know of the thorn cross now, and I thank God that I do."

"I have heard," answered Guthred. And Wulnoth asked —

"And you believe it?"

"I know not. I have never thought seriously; and yet the story is a good one, and sometimes when I

have been cast down it has comforted me. And so thou dost find the prophecy coming true, Wulnoth! Will it come true even to marrying a king's daughter?"

"Guthred," said Wulnoth gravely, "and if I said yes to that, would you say nay?"

"I! Who am I to say nay, Wulnoth? You mock me! I am a thrall, and forgotten. Nay, if it be that Edgiva, my sister, says yes, Guthred, her brother will not say nay."

"Yes she will say, when I tell her that this last quest is over. As to the thraldom and the crown, that is as it may be; but I have a thought."

"Tell me of this neatherd," said Guthred. And Wulnoth told him the story, and how the man had made his wife do as he desired, simply by doing as she bade him; whereat even the poor Prince laughed heartily.

Now when the pair reached the dwelling where Bishop Eadred tarried, Wulnoth directed the Prince to await him in an outer apartment, while he went to give the King's message; and Guthred asked why he need wait, seeing that his task was done now.

"You wait, friend," answered Wulnoth; and Guthred was content.

And the Bishop greeted Wulnoth warmly, and asked him all the tidings, and rejoiced to hear of his being a Christian, saying that he had heard of Guthrun's conversion from certain of the Danes.

And Wulnoth gave him the King's message, and Bishop Eadred looked grave and shook his head.

"Wulnoth," he said, "thinkest thou not that I have pondered this matter? And, strangely enough, thrice have I in my dreams placed the crown of Northumbria upon the head of an unknown man, and that man dressed in a churl's dress, and wearing a thrall's collar. Who is this man, and what does this dream mean?"

"Would you know the man if you saw him?" asked Wulnoth; and the Bishop said that he would.

"Then," answered Wulnoth, "go into the outer room and you will see him seated there and awaiting me."

Now, at this the Bishop was bewildered, but he complied; and when he saw Guthred, he cried out that it was the man of his dream; and Guthred said that the Bishop was the one whom he had seen; and both they and Wulnoth were filled with wonder, and marvelled at the ways of God.

And Wulnoth told Bishop Eadred who this man was, and all the story; and the Bishop talked long with Guthred, and Guthred confessed that he did believe in the Lord, though he had always been afraid to say so, because his mistress pretended to believe in the old Norse gods.

"Now," cried Bishop Eadred, "surely this is the guiding of Heaven. Go ye back, Wulnoth, to the King, and take Guthred with you and — nay, better still — let Guthred tarry here, and return to his mistress, while you go to the King. Tell him everything, and ask if it will not be well to set Guthred over the land of Northumbria."

"Gladly will I do this thing," cried Wulnoth; "and if ever my horse travelled, he must travel now."

So Guthred, saying nothing, went back to his toil, and Wulnoth started on his journey; and for two days and nights he journeyed, and then he came to the King's house, and Alfred greeted him in wonder and asked mildly why he had returned so quickly.

"I have returned, O King," he cried, "because methinks that the thing which thou desirest is done, and the man whom thou wouldst like to be king is found."

"Indeed!" said the King; "and who may the man be, Wulnoth?"

"The man whom I have journeyed far to find, O King," Wulnoth said. "I have found Guthred the Prince, the brother of Edgiva." And thereat the King looked amazed, and made Wulnoth sit and tell him all the story.

And when this was done, the King said that indeed Guthred was a fit man to be King of Northumbria.

"He is of the old stock," he said, "and in the direct line. Ay, let this be, if it may. Travel back yet once more — well may we call you 'Wanderer' — and when all is ready, if the people will listen to advice and do this thing, then I will journey down; and perchance Edgiva will be glad to see her brother, and a crowning may also mean a wedding"; and thereat the King smiled.

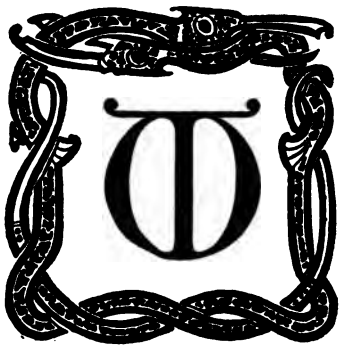
So Wulnoth hurried to see Edgiva, and to tell her the news, and how her brother fared, and what the King

purposed; and then he once more set out on his journey, and without adventure came to Northumbria.

Now, this is how Wulnoth found Guthred the Prince, and how it was purposed to give a thrall the crown of Northumbria.

CHAPTER XXV

The Crowning of Guthred



ITH haste and gladness did Wulnoth set out for the North once more, and all the world seemed filled with a love-song and a joy-song as he rode upon his way.

For the sun was shining at last for him, and for those whom he loved, and, better still, for all the land of England; and Alfred the King, who had labored so long and so patiently to weld the land into one strong people, would now have his reward also, in seeing the prosperity of his kingdom.

And Wulnoth reflected as he journeyed, for he was a man given to thinking when he was alone, that all this happiness had its fount in the truth concerning the Lord Jesus; and he remembered how Wyborga had said, in the long ago of his childhood, that the story of the thorn cross turned darkness to light, weakness to strength, and sorrow into joy; and lo, this was happening throughout the length and breadth of England.

And then he thought of the differences between the Danes and the Saxons; and yet these people were almost from the same stock and the same land, and both peoples had ever been lovers of the war game, and sea-lords and vikings at heart. And those differences all sprang from the same source — the Saxons had turned to the White Christ, and the Danes still worshipped the old cruel gods of the Northland.

Like the wind his good horse journeyed, and in good time he arrived at the Bishop's house, and told him of King Alfred's pleasure in the matter; and at that the Bishop smiled, and said that the way was a clear way now.

"But how will you make these people accept Guthred for their king?" asked Wulnoth. "If they be not willing, then it can only be done by the sword, and there is more war and desolation."

"God save us from that," said the Bishop. "Nay, friend, it is because the people are weary of war that I hope for success. They of Northumbria have long ago turned from their old gods, though in form they serve them still; and many have pondered about the Lord Christ, even as Guthred has done. Moreover, the tidings that Guthrun and they of the Danelagh have become Christians has not been without effect; and even the Danes are weary of the old, and are asking whether the new faith be not better.

"Now, the Danes will not accept one of Northumbria for leader, and the people of the land will not accept one of the Danes; so that there is like to be war again,

which neither side really desires. But if Guthred, who is of the royal blood and ancient line, is put forward, he will satisfy the claims of both parties, and in him the two may unite into one. That is my hope. For, look you, these Danes know full well that presently other sea-lords will sweep down on the land — lords who know them not, and who may serve them as they have served others, and take from them that which they have won. They will therefore the more willingly unite with the Northumbrian people, and seek to present a strong front to any new foe who may come."

"Thy words may well be true words," answered Wulnoth; "and now that I have done my task, I go to speak with Guthred my friend."

"See you tell him nothing of this, good Wulnoth," said the Bishop in warning. "No word, that is, where others may hear it spoken. For a secret once whispered is as a message sounded by trumpet; and a woman's tongue is as the crier's voice, and spreads news even more swiftly. We must keep this business quiet, until we have the holdas and thanes upon our side."

"I will be most careful," answered Wulnoth; and with that he set out. But he went not to the house of Guthred's mistress, for he had no mind to listen to the tongue of a scoldng jade, if it might be avoided. But he lurked in the woodlands; and so presently he saw Guthred come forth, and he hailed him, and together they went into the forest depths, and there did the Wanderer tell him of the King's wish, and the Bishop's work, and how the word of Wyborga would yet be

found a true word, and Guthred would be king of a land vaster and more powerful than ever ancient Lethra had been.

And then did Bishop Eadred set himself to work, and he summoned by message all the holdas and thanes, and begged them to come to a council with himself, as he had weighty things to say to them.

And because he was a wise man, and learned, and just in his ways, the holdas and thanes came, even those who were at enmity; and for the time they proclaimed truce, and sat in the Bishop's house, and asked him whereof he had to speak.

And the Bishop stood and spoke of his dreams, and how he had met the man whom he had seen in his night visions; and how this man had also seen him in his visions; and the Bishop asked who but the blessed Saint Cuthbert, whose abbey of Lindisfarne was almost in ruins, should have been permitted by Heaven to put these dreams into their heads?

But the men of Northumbria cried that they would have no churl to be their king; but that one of the old royal House of Ella should be found; and the Danes laughed, and said that they cared not for the man's birth, so that he was a true man and one able to lead them.

But one aged holda rose and said —

"Suppose, instead of quarrelling, and drawing of swords, we see this man of whom the Bishop speaks. If we like him not, then can we say nay. It will be better than quarrelling as those who quarrel in the dark about they know not what."

"The man is by Heaven destined," the Bishop said. "Here is one who can tell you of him," and he pointed to Wulnoth.

So Wulnoth stood there, and he told them the story of Guthred, Prince of Lethra, and of the prophesying of Wyborga the Wise in the long ago, and of all that had happened since. And he showed how Guthred was of the royal blood of Lethra, and how Hardacnute himself was of the old race; and both Danes and Northumbrians cried aloud that if this was so, then Guthred the son of Hardacnute was he who should be their king.

"We will stand for him," they cried, "and we will war against all in the land who seek to reject him."

"Little need for war," said the Bishop. "Know, thanes and holdas, that now all England is united beneath the rule of Alfred the Bretwalda. Guthrun is now his liegeman, and Guthred will also call Alfred overlord. Thus all the land from the Picts' wall in the north, to the sea in the south, will be one land, and its peoples as one people; and the strong will stand for the weak, and each call his neighbor brother. And this is the law of the Lord Christ, who is Alfred's Lord, and Guthrun's Lord, and shall be Guthred's Lord also."

Then did all the warriors and leaders cry that the thing was good, and they demanded to be led to the place where Guthred was; and Wulnoth could not help smiling as he thought of what the old woman would say when all the land came to take her thrall and crown him king.

So to the house he led them, the great, grim viking

lords and the best of the thanes; and behind them came many of their warriors, and they shouted with a mighty voice, and cried —

"Skoal! Skoal to thee, Guthred the Prince, who shalt be Guthred the King! Come forth to us, that we may see him who shall wear the crown and the royal bracelets."

And then did the old woman come running out, and she cried out, and bade them begone for a set of drunken rascals.

"Must you come with your folly to an honest woman's house, shouting for your king? Guthred! I have no Guthred here, and that you wot right well; but if ye want a king, go round to the sty and get one there, or to the field wherein my ass feeds, and he will make ye a good ruler. Away with ye, rascals and worthless that ye are, or I will beat you with my besom stick."

Then did the vikings laugh again, and still they cried for Guthred to come forth; and at that did Guthred come, and Wulnoth cried so that all might hear —

"The man is here, holdas and thanes. This is my friend and my brother — this is Guthred, who is son of him who was King of Lethra."

"Skoal! Skoal to thee, Guthred son of Hardacnute!" they cried; and they seized him and lifted him onto their shoulders.

But then, with a yell and a cry of anger, the old woman threw herself amongst them, and she scratched

and kicked, and grabbed hold of Guthred's leg, seeking to pull him away.

"Hola! help, there — help there, neighbors!" she cried. "Here be nameless and masterless men, and they be carrying off my thrall! Help, there."

"Silence, woman!" sternly said the Bishop. "Darest thou call these nobles by such shameful names as nameless and masterless? Silence, or thou shalt be ducked in the pond. As for this man, know that he is thy king; and ask his pardon if thou hast cause to fear his anger, for thy life is in his hand, from now, henceforth."

"What!" shrieked the old woman. "What is that? Gurth is not Gurth, but Guthred; and he is not my thrall, but the King! Oh, and I have had him whipped! Oh, and I have had him shut up! And now he will have me killed. Oh! mercy, good Gurth — I mean, good Guthred — no, I mean good King! Oh, mercy!"

But Guthred laughed, and it was the good laugh of the long ago; and he held out his hand, and lifted the woman up, saying to her —

"Have no fear, mistress. If I was whipped, doubtless I deserved it."

"You did, every bit and more!" cried the woman, anxious to justify herself. But then she remembered that she was speaking to the King, and she stammered — "No — I mean that you did n't deserve it. No, that won't do! If I say that you deserved it, that is wrong to say of the King, and if I say that you did n't deserve

it, that is contradicting you, and that is wrong, so what is a poor body to do?"

"Say nothing about it," answered Guthred. But at that Wulnoth laughed.

"Come, come, Prince, do not set her so hard a task — her tongue is too long, and it wags so freely that she must talk." And at that the woman glared at her tormentor, and seemed inclined to show him that her nails were long also.

But Guthred said that he was this woman's thrall, and that if they wanted him for King they must purchase him from her, and he decreed that if he was worth crowning he was worth his weight in gold, and at that all the holdas laughed. And they set up a beam and weighed golden bracelets against him; and that was the price they paid for Guthred to make him their king.

And then did they take him away and strip from him his humble robes and array him in the garments of a great holda, as was his by right, and they gave him homage.

And then, messages having been sent south, Alfred the King set forth for the Northland, and with him came his Queen and Edgiva the Beautiful, and in a litter old Wyborga, who said that now her task was over and her word had come to pass, and therefore she would see Guthred crowned, and one more thing accomplished, ere she closed her eyes in death.

And with a great retinue into Northumbria came Alfred; and Guthred, and the thanes, and the holdas awaited his coming, and all cried "Skoal" to him; and

Guthred came and knelt and kissed his hand, and did him homage as his overlord and Bretwalda.

And Alfred raised Guthred and embraced him, and called him his brother, and greeted thanes and holdas as his friends, and there was rejoicing in all the land.

But who shall speak of the meeting of Guthred with Edgiva his beautiful sister, after so many years of absence? Ah, it was good for the Prince to look upon her beauty and to hear her voice, and hard was it for him to remember that all the ills had passed away, and that he was as a king now and would soon be crowned.

And to old Wyborga did he go and kneel and ask her blessing. And Wyborga laid her hand upon his head and blessed him, and also Wulnoth and Edgiva; and she said gladly —

"Now the end is near, and I also am going to my crowning, and you, my children, have to tarry until it is the Lord's will to call you. My words have come true, and you three are united, now that you know the meaning of the thorn-crowned cross. Yea, and you, Wulnoth, you mighty man, have helped to plant it firmly in this land when it was in danger of being uprooted; and you have aided two kings to be crowned. Hard has been your fight, Wulnoth, and like a hero have you conquered; and ere I die your reward shall be sure."

And then did Wulnoth ask Wyborga of a thing which had long worried him.

"Where is he, good mother, with whom I wrestled

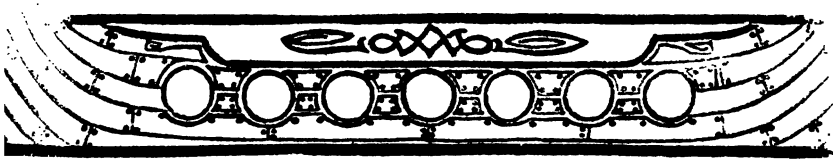
so often?" he said, "and what is the meaning of his riddle?"

"Thou hast slain him at last, Wulnoth, she answered softly, "or I should say that thy dear Lord has slain him for thee. For indeed he was thyself — thy evil spirit, Wulnoth. The Wulnoth who desired the things of earth, and the pride of life, and the lust of the flesh. Wulnoth, though all may not know it, each one who serves the Lord must so fight with himself, and if he fights beneath the cross, he wins, but if he fights in his own strength he is vanquished; and if self is not conquered, then it is master forever, and leads the better will and desire in thraldom."

So did Wyborga say, and long did Wulnoth ponder, for the thing was as a strange, strange thing to him; yet he could see that always this being had sought to lead him from the way of duty into the way of desire, and he rejoiced that he had striven and overcome, as he had done.

Now, after this did the holdas and thanes, and all the people, come and take Guthred, and lead him away to the sacred stone — at least, now that they were departing from the old gods they looked upon it as sacred no longer — but because always their kings had been proclaimed there, they took Guthred also; and the stone is on a hill named Oswin's Dune.

And then they placed upon his arms the royal bracelets, and upon his head the golden circlet, and hailed him as King of Northumbria and overlord of every thane and holda there. And Guthred took off his



crown and laid it before Alfred, and Alfred placed it again upon his head; and the two kings sat side by side and drank heal to each other, and Wulnoth stood beside his friend and brother Guthred, and Edgiva sat at his side.

Then from thence did Guthred go to Lindisfarne Abbey, and there was he baptized by the Bishop, and there did he profess his Lord, and vow to rebuild the Abbey and set it in order. And he gave broad lands to the Bishop to be held for the Church; and from that gift made by Guthred the King it comes that right down to this very day, the Bishop of Durham may, if he chooses, don his scarlet robes and seat himself beside the judges whenever they come to try criminals within what is called his palatinate — that is, the boundaries of those lands which were given to Bishop Eadred, in the days of his crowning by Guthred.

And this is how the people of Northumbria chose Guthred for their king, and the words spoken of old by Wyborga came true in the end.

CHAPTER XXVI

Of the Wedding of Wulnoth and Edgiva

NOW, on the evening of that day whereon Guthred was crowned at Oswin's Dune, Wulnoth stood alone in the gathering shadows, pondering on all that had taken place, and it was as peace time in his heart.

He was happy, very happy, and first of all because now he knew the happiness which comes from the story of the thorn-wreathed cross; and then because he saw his friend and brother, Guthred, now no longer a poor thrall, but a king, and the friend of Alfred the Bretwalda. That was a good thing in the eyes of Wulnoth, and right glad was he that he had fulfilled his word and had never turned aside from seeking for Guthred.

And he was happy because his Princess was happy in her brother's joy. It had been good for him to watch her face and see the light play upon it, as the sunlight

plays upon the meadows and the lakes when, in the morning, it first rises above the hills and peeps down into the sleepy valleys at their feet.

And yet there was another cause for joy, and it was a deep, deep cause, as a deep well wherein is cool clear water, and around which cluster the nodding ferns. For now he thought that his tasks were over, and he might truly whisper his love-song into the ears of Edgiva, knowing that though she was a king's daughter, and the sister of a king, she would listen to his tale more gladly than she would heed the words of the greatest and mightiest in the land.

So he stood thinking his own thoughts, and the shadows grew and the moon rose, and then an owl hooted in the woods, and his mind went back to the days when, with brave Wahrmund, he had stood in the woods of East Anglia and had heard the sign which first called Alfred to his side.

But after the owl, there came the sound of another song — the song of a tiny night-singer telling his love tale to his little mate, and the song flowed like a stream of melody, like the purling of the brooklet in the moonlight, like the voice of the wavelets on the shelly sands, like the whispering of the night wind to the bending trees.

It got into the heart of Wulnoth, and he stood listening, a smile on his face, and he thought how much better this was than the song of the sword or the hiss of the flames as they burst through the roof, and he said softly —

"Sing, sing, little bird — sing to thy shy mate whom thou lovest; but though I may not sing as sweetly, thy song is no gladder than is mine when I think of my Princess. O night-singer, would that I could learn thy song and so sing to my love — to my Edgiva!"

Then a little voice spoke in his ear, and a little hand stole around his neck, and the voice said softly —

"But, perchance, thy Edgiva might better love to hear thy words in thine own voice than in the sweetest tones of the night-singer, Wulnoth."

And he turned and beheld his Princess, and he took her in his arms, and she made no struggle, but yielded gladly as a tired bird nestles in its nest; and she turned her face towards his own and called him Wulnoth, and love, and hero, and true one; and it was happy peace time for them both.

"All the world seems beautiful, dear love," he said to her. "It is like the land of the fairies to my eyes, such is the happiness that comes from love that has found its answer and its mate."

"Dearest," she said, "perchance also it is because of a greater happiness which comes to us from Him Whom we serve. We have found the meaning of Wyborga's sign now, sweetheart, though it seemed so strange to us when we were children away there in Lethra."

And so they two stood, and their hearts were too full for speech, yet in their very silence they seemed to talk and tell each other of their love, which had

grown and grown all through the long years of their waiting.

And while they stood thus, from the shadows came the sound of a harp and the voice of a singer, and thus the unseen sang —

Sweet is the peace time,
Sweet is the moonlight,
Sweet is the love-song
Of the night-singer.
He to his loved one
Sings in the shadow,
Calling her to him
Waiting there lonely.
Sweet is the bird-song
Heard in the moonlight.

Sweet is the peace time,
When the wind whispers,
Telling its love-tale
To the leaves trembling;
Softly and sweetly
Breathing its story,
While in their love-joy,
Are the leaves sighing.
Sweet is the wind-song
Heard in the moonlight.

But of all peace times,
Love-time is sweetest;
And of all earth-songs,
Love-song is dearest:
Such song as Wulnoth
Tells to Edgiva —
They amongst lovers
Of all most faithful.
Sweet be their love-song,
Told in the moonlight.

Hard was the waiting,
Sore was the battle;
Weary the heart grew
Waiting and longing.
Now comes the joy-time,
Lovéd and loving;
Hearts shall united be,
Never to sunder.
Glad be their love-song,
Told in the moonlight.

Then did the song cease, and to them came Alfred the King, and he smiled and said —

"You, my Wulnoth, and you, sweet Edgiva — you who have been so faithful to me in the days of my trial — am I unkind that I thus come and spoil your song with my poor music? If that is so, forgive me, for I came that I might seek to repay in part all that you have done for me."

"Alfred is ever welcome," said Edgiva, and so said Wulnoth; but the King laughed and said —

"Now, nay. Not even Alfred is welcome when he comes to stop such sweet tales as yours. But this is the matter of it, dear friends. There should be something done this night without which the joy of this day will be incomplete, and wot ye what that something is?"

Now at that Edgiva grew rosy red and turned her face away, for in great joy and in great desire, sometimes the shame thought comes, as if 't were wrong to be glad at that which the heart most longs for.

But Wulnoth looked down at the dear one by his

side, and he turned the little face towards his own love-filled eyes, and he spake and said —

"My Princess, of old I was thy watcher, and who should be so good a watcher as thy husband? Now, dear heart, thou hast heard the words of the King, and thou dost know all the words that my heart would speak; but how is it with thee, my Princess? Wilt thou give me this my great reward, as the King has said, for surely never could be better time than now?"

"Dost want debts paid so quickly, Wulnoth?" she asked. And he answered gravely —

"Nay, not if the paying is heavy to thee, my Princess. Nor indeed do I want a debt paid at all. All that I have done I give thee freely, and all that I crave from thee I crave as a free gift."

"Why, dear heart," the Princess said softly, "I must not jest with thee, for thou, who art so great and so strong, dost take all things seriously. Canst doubt, dearest, that I give freely that which thou dost covet, and give gladly because in the giving I get my greatest joy? I think I have loved thee, Wulnoth, ever since I can remember. I loved thee when thou didst slay the bear, and when thou didst tread the birds' road for me, and when thou didst refuse to tarry in the forest and make thy love a forest queen, and I loved thee most when thou wast too honest to pretend to a faith which thou didst not feel, in order that thou mightest win thy desire easily. I love thee, my Wulnoth, and what can I say more save this — let it be as the King commands."

"Now by my troth!" cried the King right merrily, "would we had all our subjects as willing and docile. But forgive me, Edgiva, well named the Beautiful, nor think it too much kindness that I show; for, by my kingdom, if we keep thee unmated much longer, now that we have peace time and men have leisure to think, we shall have all the land quarrelling about thee, and Wulnoth will either have to kill or be killed."

With such merry words did Alfred speak, seeking to put them at peace; and then together did they all enter the hall where, amidst the thanes and holdas, the King sat feasting and listening to the gleemen. And to them did Guthred say —

"Greeting, fair sister, and greeting, Wulnoth, friend and brother. We have missed you from the feast; and doubtless ye have had better things to think of than our poor company." And Wulnoth answered with a smile —

"Much better things, O King." Whereat all there laughed.

"Now I see that Wulnoth will never be found when he is needed," cried one holda. "What say ye, comrades? How shall we prevent this trouble?"

"Marry, cure him in the only way he can be cured," answered another with a grim twinkle in his eye. "Let the lovers mate, and ever after Wulnoth will be found ready to go on the King's business. 'T is the best cure I wot of, and it did not fail in my case, and that was bad enough."

Then did the warriors laugh again until the hall

rang; for they knew that the old soldier had married a shrew, who gave him no peace until she did him the kindness to die.

But King Alfred rose, and then all grew silent; and he said —

"Friends, holdas, and thanes, and you, royal Guthred, jest and merriment are good in their place, and this is their place; and yet there is that which is solemn. For true love, faithfully kept through long years, is a solemn thing, and a holy thing, and that whereon we may ask the blessing of the Lord; and such love hath been that of Wulnoth my friend, and of Edgiva the Beautiful. And now methinks that that which has been done this day will not be complete unless there is another deed done." And at this all the soldiers rose and held their drinking horns aloft, and cried, "Waes heal to Wulnoth the Wanderer, and to Edgiva the Beautiful."

"Nay, not the Wanderer now," cried the King, "for I make Wulnoth Lord of Cantua, and of the marches which border East Anglia and Guthrun's realm; and to him I give overship of my ports, and charge of my long ships, and him I make one of the chiefest thanes of the south, and appoint him the keeper of the King's banner during all his life."

"Skoal! Skoal! Wulnoth, warden of the marches," they cried. "Skoal to thee and to the fair one who shall be thy bride! Skoal, and joy time to you both!"

Then did Guthred rise and take Wulnoth's hand, and he said —

"Little have I to say adding to the words of the King, Wulnoth, friend and brother. Only this: never had man more faithful friend than I have had in thee, and never did man more deserve his reward than thou dost deserve thine. This thing was told in the long ago, and now it is, and who shall say it nay? Therefore do I kiss my sister, and give her to thee, and may joy time and peace time be for you both."

And then did the Bishop come, and Wulnoth and Edgiva the Beautiful stood before him; and never had the Beautiful looked sweeter and fairer than now, though from girlhood to womanhood she had grown waiting, and sometimes knowing wandering and want when from the Danes she had been forced to hide. And there before all men did they stand, and the two kings stood by, and the Bishop joined their hands, and Alfred himself gave a ring from his own finger, set with precious stones, wherewith the lovers plighted their solemn troth the one to the other.

And thus did Wulnoth gain his reward, and Edgiva the Beautiful became his wife, and the joy came to them, even as Wyborga the Wise had said that it would come.

And that very night did they go and kiss Wyborga; and she smiled and folded her hands, and said —

"I did but tarry for this, my children. Now all my task is done, and I go to my Lord; and may He guide you all the way and bring you to Himself at the end."

So said Wyborga the Wise, and she turned on her

couch to sleep; and when they came to waken her in the morning, lo, she lay in the majesty of death; and the old wrinkled face seemed to have grown younger, and the silver locks lay smooth on either cheek, and her face was as the dignified face of majesty, yet gentle and gracious as a holy saint.

And they wept for Wyborga, those three who had most cause to think of her; but Alfred the Bretwalda said softly —

"Weep not for her, for she has looked in the face of her Lord, and behold, she has life, and youth, and immortality forever."

Now, this is how Wulnoth and Edgiva were united, and this is how the Wise Wyborga went to her Lord when her work was accomplished.

CHAPTER XXVII

Skoal!

TO the longest day the night must follow, and to the best song an end must come; and so it is with the song of Wulnoth.

And truly, the song might have ended when it was love time and peace time, and when he and Edgiva the Beautiful were happy, but that there are other things to tell; or else how happened it that Gyso the Gleeman ever sang this song?

This, then, is the happening of it, though many things can be but briefly mentioned; for he who would sing all the wisdom and brave deeds of Alfred the Bretwalda must needs sing a long, long song.

Now, though Alfred the King had beaten the Danes and broken their power, and bound all England in one, not a year passed without some of the Black Strangers appearing, and many a hard fight did he have, and many a long period had Wulnoth to be away from the

Lady Edgiva, either bearing the King's banner or defending his ports; for these pirates seemed to grow more numerous by being slain, and again and again did they make their attempts to bring our fair England beneath their rule.

And from Scandinavia came fresh hordes in their ships, and sailed along the English Channel, now attacking England, and anon France, and carrying desolation to one or the other.

There was that Hrolf, or Rollo, he of whom we have spoken, called the Ganger, or Walker, because he was so tall and strong that no horse could bear him. He came to England, but such a beating did he get, that he went to France and there made war until he at last made league with Charles the Simple, and had the French king's daughter given to him for his wife. And this Rollo was required to kiss the King's hand and call him overlord; but this was not to his mind; so, instead, he seized his foot and tipped the King over. This Rollo was given Normandy for his possession, and was baptized and called Robert; and well in after days had Saxon England to rue that Robert of Normandy ever lived, seeing that from him sprang that Norman William who put so hard a yoke on the Saxon shoulders.

Then came a mighty host — two hundred and fifty ships sailed against the south coast, and eighty more sailed up the Thames; and all these Alfred and his host had to meet; and these were led by that Hastings who of all the Danish holdas was amongst the most noble.

And after Guthrun had died, one Eric became King of East Anglia; and he broke troth with King Alfred, and aided the strangers, and the war was hard in the land.

And in those days did Alfred do a good thing; for he came upon a camp of the Danes, and there were the wife and the sons of this Hastings; and Alfred had them in his power, and might have forced Hastings to come to terms, but this he would not do. But he treated the lady and the children with courtesy, and sent them safe and unharmed to Hastings, with kingly greeting, though some there said that it was a foolish thing that was done. But Alfred was a true knight, and made no war against women and children; and this thing happened at that place which now we call Benfleet.

Hastings showed no gratitude, but advanced right across England and pressed Mercia, until the King and Wulnoth and the champions defeated him at the borders of the river Severn, and sent him back in full retreat to East Anglia.

Then did the Danes come sailing up against London, and their ships lay thick in the Thames, just where the river Lea joins it.

But Alfred built walls and drained away the water, and the Danes could not sail out again, and had to abandon the ships and flee back to East Anglia once more.

Then they burst forth again and crossed the country to the westward, and reached Quatbridge, and there they encamped. But Alfred, never daunted, came

against them, and Hastings fled; and, weary of such a foe as the Saxon King, he sailed for France, and came no more against the land.

Then Alfred busied himself, and had many long ships built, and sent to Friesland for sailors, because the Saxons were not good at navigating the ships. But he had no foreigners for warriors, for his own good Saxons, if they could not manage the sails, could handle sword and shield and spear; and thus he raised a goodly fleet, and drove the Danes from his seas, and delivered his coasts.

And once two Danish ships were fought and conquered, and the ships drifted ashore with all their crews, and were destroyed, and the vikings taken prisoners.

And now for once Alfred was not mild; for he had the men brought to his city of Winchester, and there he had them all hanged, man by man, and spared none. And in later days some have tried to cry shame on the King for this; but perchance if they had lived in his day, and seen the harrying and the burning, and had, like him, done nothing to bring the foe, but had dealt with them gently and fairly — if they had done this, they might perhaps have been quite as ready to teach the Danes a lesson, seeing that kindness was of no avail, and to hang the crews, as Alfred the Bretwalda was.

And through all this time of warring the King was busy thinking for his kingdom's good. He it was who had the Bible written in the tongue which the people could understand. He it was who taught himself Latin by translating sentence by sentence, what his friend

Asser wrote for him. He taught the people how to measure time, by having candles marked and burning beneath glasses, so that every mark reached meant one hour gone. He it was who wrote books that to-day even are helpful to us — "The King's Hand-book" and the book called "Orosius" — and the book which he called his Family Library. Alfred it was who taught the people the law, and who gave them trial by jury, and the frithgild, by which each man was pledged to aid his neighbor. And in London the guild met, in a hall called the Guild Hall.

Alfred it was who made friends with all learned men and travelled men, with Audher, who had tried to sail northward to the pole, and with Walstan, who sailed right to the far end of the Baltic. He it was, too, who sent Bishop Swithelm all the way to India, to carry greetings to the Syrian Christians who dwelt there; and the stout old Bishop not only undertook the journey, but returned safe, and brought gifts to the King.

All these things did Alfred the King, the wisest man in England, as he has been justly called; and all the time he warred and defended the land from the foe; and so he lived, and did well; and Wulnoth was his faithful warrior, and grew gray in his wars; and then, in the end, the King sickened and died, and all the land mourned for him who had ruled so well and done so wisely.

Now, when Alfred the King was dead, trouble came and war again. For Edward, the son of the dead King,

was proclaimed King, but Ethelwald, son of Ethelbald, he also claimed the throne; and between these two of one blood there was war and hate, and the sword-song again; and men gathered some to one side and some to the other and prepared for battle.

And then came Wulnoth, and he was now a gray-haired champion, and amongst the wisest in the land; and he joined Edward, for Edward was Alfred's son. And how he wished then that Guthred were with him; but alas! Guthred had died, and Guthred's sons were rebellious, and kept not faith. And Guthrun was dead also; and the Danes of the Danelagh and of Northumbria and of East Anglia, they banded with Ethelwald, and were led by the Danish King, Eric; and they carried fire and sword once more, and made the sword-song be heard, and the land wept again for the sorrow that had come to it.

And the Danes and the people with Ethelwald were more than the people with Edward, so that Alfred's son had to flee from place to place, as the King, his father, had done in the days passed away.

And then did Wulnoth send seven times to the men of Cantua, over whom he had ruled; but they had their hearts darkened, and they refused to come to the King's aid, and Wulnoth grew sad, for now he thought that the end must surely come.

"Now, King," said Wulnoth to Edward, "I have seen three kings meet these Danes when their numbers were few; and two of the three kings were slain, and the third — thine own father — beat the foe and drove

them away. Now, if it is thy mind to take the chance, let us march forward towards the borders of East Anglia, and there on the marches we will meet the foe and see what may be done."

"Let it be as thou sayest, thane," answered Edward; "for of a truth thou art the most skilled and renowned in the land."

So Wulnoth kissed Edgiva his wife, and bade her adieu; and she looked into his face and wept; and she said —

"Wulnoth, my husband, often hast thou gone away to the war game, and my heart has been sad, for I have feared for you. But now you go, and my heart is not sad but dead, for I know that we shall meet no more in life here, but in the life hereafter shall we meet."

"Cheer thee, my lady wife," he answered. "'T is a dark saying." But she said —

"I know, husband. The spirit of Wyborga seems upon me, and I know we part now, and you will no more return alive."

"Why, then, lady wife," he answered, "if that be so, the end must come when God wills. Surely you would not have me act a nithing part, and leave the son of Alfred in his hour of need?"

"Thou knowest better, husband," she made answer. "I would have you go to duty, as you have ever gone. Now kiss me once more, for my heart is heavy and my spirit dark."

So Wulnoth kissed Edgiva and bade her farewell, and charged her that if it should be as she feared, then

she should give his last greetings to his two sons who were away in Mercia at the time and seek to counsel them ever to serve Edward faithfully.

Then towards East Anglia did Wulnoth march with the King — towards that very land where first he had met with Alfred, and where he had seen Edmund the Martyr lay down his life for the Lord's glory.

And there stretched the army of Ethelwald, like a host spread over the face of the land.

"Now," said Wulnoth as he gazed upon the foe, "here we are like to have a battle indeed. And here must every man prove himself a hero, for there is no choice but victory or death for us."

And then did the war-horns sound, and the armies rushed to the fray, and the forces of Ethelwald were so numerous that they quite surrounded the army of Edward, as the tide running in surrounds the sentinel rocks that line the shore.

But Wulnoth and his friends, and all who were true to Edward, they met the foe undaunted, and the war-cries rang out and the sword-song was heard, and, mighty as the host of the foe was, they could not overwhelm the Saxons.

All day did the battle rage, until the water in the dykes ran crimson, horrible to see, and the dead lay thick on the earth, and yet neither side could claim the victory.

But when the day drew in, and even the champions were weary and the numbers were thinned, the Danes made a desperate charge and broke the Saxon

ranks; and in that charge Wulnoth, sore and wounded, smote Ethelwald the son of Ethelbald from his saddle, and laid him dead upon the earth. And then did he cry to Edward the King and say —

"Greeting, O King! Now did the Lady Edgiva prophesy that this would be my last fight, and lo! I am wounded and nigh to the end. This is my rede, O King, that ye draw off, for though the Danes are smitten through and through, by very numbers they will conquer if ye tarry. Draw off — the man who sought thy crown is dead, and the evil will die of itself. But as for me, I will fight one last fight and then, good-night!"

And with that Wulnoth pushed forward, and he came nigh the Danish king Eric, even Eric the Mighty, and he cried greeting to him —

"Hail, King Eric!" he said. "I have fought in many a field of slaughter, but never in such a one as this. I have slain many of thy holdas in my time, and now the end draws near. How sayest thou, Eric? I am a thane of name; I like not to die by common spear. Come now, and let us twain speak a word, and if I die I die by a champion's hand, and if I smite thee down surely I shall follow thee quickly. Skoal, Skoal! — the old Northland cry, Eric! Wilt thou go holmgang with me?"

"Ay, for thou hast slain Ethelwald, and I will slay thee right gladly," answered the Dane, "and if I die by thy hand, then honorable is the death."

So these twain met, and they fought, and all around

stood still that the champions of pride might play the man's game unhindered. And it was a mighty fight, and a good fight, and of it the scalds and the gleeman sang for many a day.

For Wulnoth smote a blow that cleaved its way through Eric's left wrist, and Eric struck back with all his force, and the blow fell on the shoulder of Wulnoth and nigh severed it; and these two champions reeled back and looked at each other, and Wulnoth cried again —

"Skoal to thee, smiter of blows! Skoal! Methinks that we shall journey together," and then he changed his axe into the other hand and again they fought. And Eric smote Wulnoth sore and deep in the side, and Wulnoth raised his axe high in his left hand and smote with all his might, and helm and head were split together, and King Eric fell side by side with his foe.

Then did Wulnoth raise himself and cry again —

"Skoal! Skoal to thee, Eric, brave champion! Skoal to thee, Edward, for both thy foes are slain and thou shalt reign in peace. Skoal! I — I —" and then his voice failed and he gasped, "Edgiva! Edgiva beloved! I die," and with that he fell dead across the body of King Eric.

And the battle stayed, for indeed none could fight longer. And the Danes buried King Eric on the field, but the Saxons bore the body of Wulnoth with sorrow and brought it safely to Edgiva. And the field of that fight was called amongst men the Field of the Great Slaughter — so vast was the number who lay there dead.

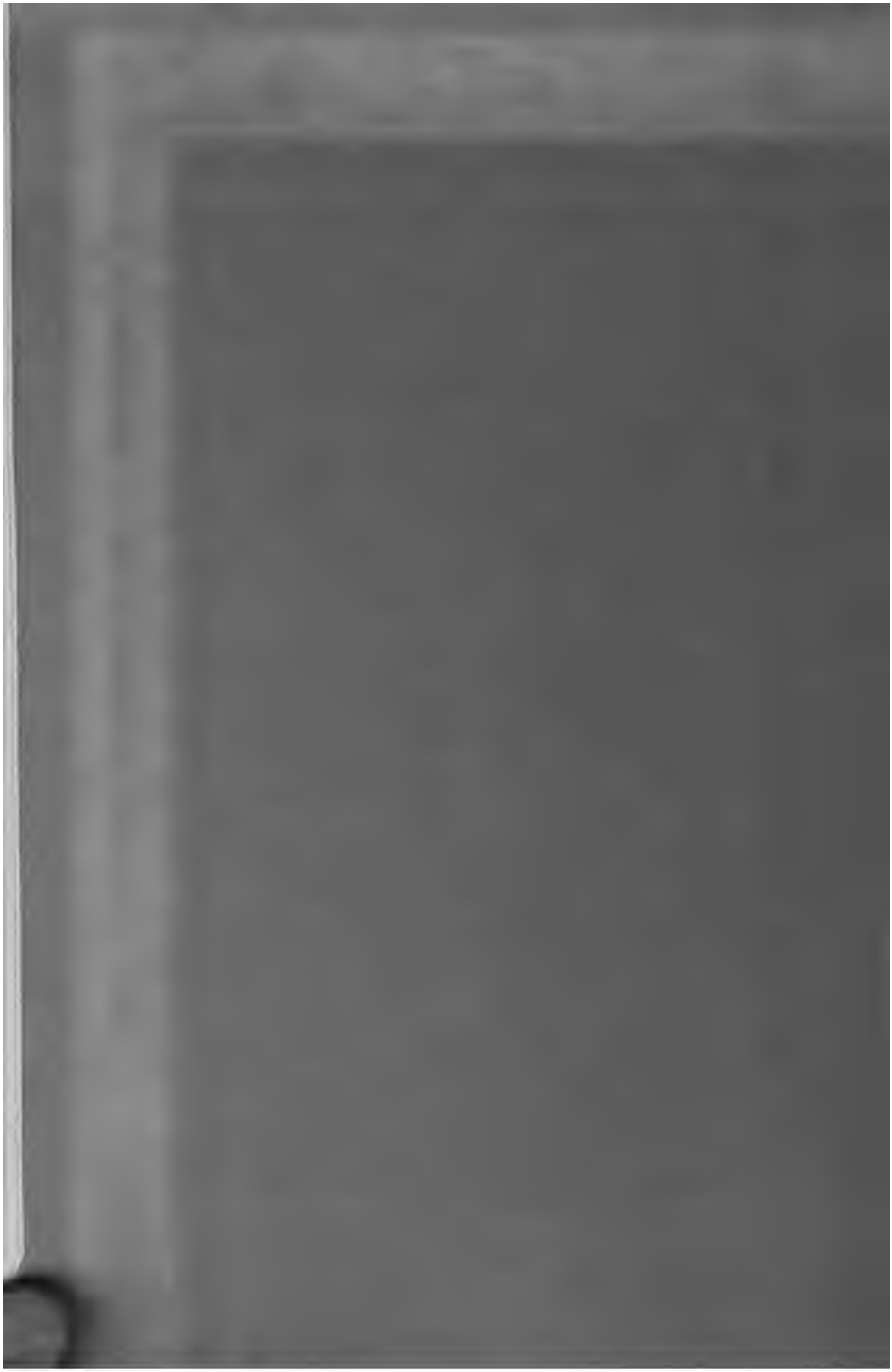
And the whole of the Saxons made lamentation for Wulnoth, and they buried him with all honor; and Edgiva gave his message to his sons and smiled upon them and then laid her down. And soon her own death came, and she went to join her husband in the Kingdom of that Master Whom they had both learnt to serve.

And Edward became king, and, that the name and the fame of Wulnoth might not be forgotten, he ordered that Gyso his gleeman should make this song. And Gyso obeyed and sang, and they said it was a good song and a true song, and that Wulnoth was worthy of the singing.

And so ends the song; and it is for those who read to say whether it is as Gyso said, fair and true, and whether the deeds of those days are worthy of honorable remembrance.

And from across the "has-been" they look, the heroes of old — Wulnoth, and Wahrmund, and Osric, Guthrun, Guthred, and Alfred; and to you, their descendants, they cry in the cry of the old Northland, to follow their steps, and be heroes in your day as they in theirs, and follow the White Christ Whom they loved and served, when they cast aside the gods of the Northland.

To you they cry, you sons of the Saxons —
"Skoal! Skoal! Skoal!"

THE END

E.H. 21